



About Us: <http://www.the-criterion.com/about/>

Archive: <http://www.the-criterion.com/archive/>

Contact Us: <http://www.the-criterion.com/contact/>

Editorial Board: <http://www.the-criterion.com/editorial-board/>

Submission: <http://www.the-criterion.com/submission/>

FAQ: <http://www.the-criterion.com/fa/>



ISSN 2278-9529
Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal
www.galaxyimrj.com

Trauma of Stillbirth: A Study of Jhumpa Lahiri's Short Story *Temporary Matter*

Pavithra Satheeshkumar

Head of the Department of Languages
Treamis World School
Bangalore 560105

Article History: Submitted-17/12/2017, Revised-19/01/2018, Accepted-22/01/2018, Published-28/02/2018.

Abstract:

This paper invites the reader to reflect on the degree of trauma by analysing the damaged psyche of the protagonist Shobha after the devastating and unexpected loss of her unborn baby and also the ways of coping with this condition. It also throws light on the role of her husband Shukumar, either alleviating or aggravating the existing condition.

Jhumpa Lahiri is popularly known as the writer of Indian diaspora. Most of her stories depict the themes of diaspora such as identity crisis, alienation of individuals from their homelands and cross-cultural conflicts of the immigrated peoples. But the short story 'Temporary Matter' provides a distinct picture of the pervading presence of trauma after a stillbirth. Although the story takes place only for five days, it describes the ups and downs of the couple's relationship from the day they got married through the wife's pregnancy until the present, with enough details.

Keywords: Trauma, psyche, unexpected loss, diaspora, homelands.

Trauma is a condition of prolonged emotional response resulting from death, stillbirth, war, accidents or some other natural disasters. Stillbirth which is defined as the '*fetal death at 20 or more weeks of gestation*,'¹ presents a grave danger to the psychological development of the mother and the members of the subsequent family.

*Bereavement, particularly when sudden and traumatic such as in the case of stillbirth, poses the risk of many negative long-term social, psychological, and biological outcomes.*²

¹ Huberty, Jennifer L., et al. "A qualitative study exploring womens beliefs about physical activity after stillbirth." BMC Pregnancy and Childbirth 2014, 14:26 <http://www.biomedcentral.com/1471-2393/14/26>

² Cacciatore, Joanne. "Stillbirth: Patient-centered Psychosocial Care." CLINICAL OBSTETRICS AND GYNECOLOGY Volume 53, Number 3, 691699, 2010, Lippincott Williams & Wilkins

Emotional and psychological symptoms of trauma include remaining emotionally distant, withdrawing from socialisation, disordered life, repression of feelings, haunting memories, having mood swings, feeling angry, sad, hopeless and so on. It is not quite easy to help a person who is going through a traumatic and distressing experience, but the support from the family can become a crucial factor in one's recovery.

In this story Shobha goes through this traumatic experience after the stillbirth. Though her husband Shukumar feels sad and depressed for the loss of their unborn baby, it does not affect the way it affects Shobha. The grief of the loss of her baby, which she has not fully poured forth, makes her estrange herself from the company of her friends and her husband as well. In addition to that, lack of emotional support from her husband pushes this condition to the heights and worsens their relationship and brings unforeseen changes in her lifestyle. So, a careful examination of this story facilitates us to comprehend the signs and status of her trauma caused by the stillbirth and the ways of tackling it.

Being emotionally distant or being withdrawn from the loved ones is one of the common signs noticeable in people who are coping with trauma. As we know from the story, Shobha hardly speaks to her husband Shukumar. Though she goes to work, we hardly see her talking about her work or anything with her husband. She gets up early goes to office before Shukumar wakes up and comes back in the evening, and engages herself in proofreading files. The only time she has talked a sentence or two with him is before she goes to bed. That too we know from Shukumar's view that she has forced herself to do so.

Shukumar's main fault here is that he does not try to break her silence. All he does is waiting for this phase to pass without investing his energy to console her. As we have seen, Shobha who is affected more than her husband doesn't talk about the loss of the baby, doesn't grieve or doesn't get angry except one time as soon as she is discharged from the hospital, she grabs all the toys and throws them in the trash and starts crying. After that we don't see either him or her conveying intense agony or grieving for the loss of their baby together. So, one can perceive her silence as the suppression of her sorrow. It also indicates that she has the difficulty in expressing her grief and at the same time her husband's failure to understand her silence as the outcome of her grieving process for the terrible loss of their unborn baby, makes life even more complicated. Because, during this situation, all a grieving mother needs is a good support in the form of care or comforting words from one's partner. But, what Shukumar does is the opposite of this. He stands aloof from his wife's strange behaviour and let her dwell in her newly created world. This makes them as experts at avoiding each other spending as much time on separate floors in their three bed room house. He recalls:

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. (Lahiri 5)

This implies that Shobha has detached herself completely from the romantic intimacy of her husband. This might be for two reasons. One is, she is still suffering and the other one is her husband's reciprocation to that suffering is nil. In that situation, she obviously feels that she is the only one who is missing the baby and lamenting for the loss. This makes her distance herself from her husband both physically and emotionally.

Another indication of trauma that is commonly found in the women who have been through stillbirth is the social withdrawal. Cutting off from friends and staying away from all the things one loved are the clear indicators of depression or suffering. All the things Shobha loved about like going to market, doing shopping, partying are no longer in the scene. She used to get things from market, cook plenty of dishes for friends even when she was pregnant. But after this stillbirth she has neither invited any of her friends home nor she has gone out to have fun. Only company they had was her mother who visited them for about two months after the incident. What is understood here is that it might be difficult for a mother after stillbirth to hang out with her friends for the reasons like seeing the babies of her friends' children might bring back the memories and make her feel sad, and answering her friends' queries about what has caused this stillbirth.

However, when she started isolating herself from socialising, Shukumar began getting adjusted to the environment created in their household. He has stopped looking forward for weekends. So, they both have remained away from their close friends and relatives. They do not find solace in each other's arms and they hardly converse with each other. They live under the same roof like familiar strangers. This clearly makes it hard for Shobha to cope with the trauma.

One can witness the results of post-traumatic condition encompassing all spheres of her life gradually. Her disordered life is another manifestation of trauma. From the day she got married to till September for almost three years she has led a very disciplined life. She took care of all the household activities like paying bills on time, bringing necessary things and keeping their three bed room house neat, organised and beautiful. She even documented each recipe in her notebook with a date. But now she has not concerned about any of these things. She sits with the pile of things without even moving them. This reminds us of the lines of the poem *Dreams* by Langston Hughes, where he describes the effect of fallen dreams or things:

*Hold fast to dreams
For if dreams die*

*Life is a broken-winged bird
That cannot fly.*³

These powerful lines echo the status of this household precisely. Shobha being the center of the family, feels like she is torn apart when her nurtured dreams get broken in no time. She loses interest in life. Her house looks rumpled and chaotic. She leaves things in a haphazard way and is no longer disciplined.

No doubt her decision to move out has to do with the trauma. Because as Karen Deemester puts it

*Trauma inevitably damages the victim's faith in the assumptions he has held in the past about himself and the world and leaves him struggling to find new, more reliable ideologies to give order and meaning to his post-traumatic life.*⁴

An understanding of Shobha's changed lifestyle and fractured mind i.e. her complete cut off from social life, her personal relationship with her husband and disorganised lifestyle, suggest that she has lost hope and faith in her past life and on the verge of creating a new one.

Another issue that contributes to her decision of moving out is the haunting memories of that house, which play a great role in the case of trauma. As Joanne Cacciatore puts it:

*Upon release from the hospital, mothers return home to empty nurseries, dressers filled with newborn clothes and diapers, breasts full with milk for their baby who died, and the anticipation of family and friends met with sorrow and tragedy. The psychosocial and biological stressors in the immediate aftermath of a baby's death can be overwhelming for grieving mothers.*⁵

For Shobha her bedroom is the place, which haunted her the most with its beautiful moments and sweet memories. The pictures of ducks they have drawn on the wall and rabbits playing with drums and trumpets in their bedroom, a beautiful cherry crib and rocking chair with chequered cushion they have brought to welcome the baby, all these make her difficult to lead life in that house. Her life was filled with happiness and joy during those months of pregnancy. Now every time she goes into her bedroom, she sees her broken and unfulfilled dreams. That is why she stayed away from that bedroom.

³ Arnold Rampersad. "The collected Poems of Langston Hughes." New York: Vintage Classics, 1995.32.

⁴ Karen Deemester. "Trauma and Recovery in Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*" *Modern Fiction Studies*, 44.3 (1998) 650.

⁵ Cacciatore J, Psychological Effects of Stillbirth, *Seminars in Fetal & Neonatal Medicine* (2012), <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.siny.2012.09.001>

On the contrary her husband is happy with that room and has turned that into his study room. He spends all his time in there. Instead of understanding what she is going through and coping to come out of that, he enjoys his independence being in that room which seems like hell to her. He knows how it haunted her but he fails to apprehend the essence of her strange, inexplicable grief. That again prompts her to distance herself from that room and from her husband as well.

From the above analysis it becomes clear that Shukumar instead of assisting her to recover from the traumatic feeling he aggravates it by making himself emotionally unavailable to her for almost six months. Eva Tettenborn observation about the female characters unfolding a great destructive potential in regard to their or other people's relationships seems true in most of Lahiri's short stories⁶. But in the short story Temporary Matter it is Shukumar's coldness and impassivity act as a threat to their relationship.

His preconceived notion about Shobha as the embodiment of strong, powerful woman, draws him in the wrong way. Though she portrayed herself as stronger woman in some difficult family situations but losing her own baby strips her off of her strength. He had seen closely how his grief stricken mother abandoned almost everything and everyone when his father died but he fails to notice the similar effect on his wife. He thinks shobha is different and she can handle any critical situations herself.

Besides, his tumults and some repressed feelings keep him in darkness. Being a student at the age of thirty five created anxiety in him that too when he heard from Shobha that she was pregnant. We can notice that he never dreams of playing with kids, having fun until the ninth month just a day before the delivery. That was the first time he envisions him and Shobha being in a station Wagon with kids in the back seat. But the next day he saw his dreams crushed when the stillborn baby was put in his hands. On top of all that, the comment from Shobha's mother about he was not with her when she was going through hard time in the hospital makes him feel depressed though he knew it was not his fault. Instead of talking to her he just suppresses all this, which intensifies already existing gap between them by bringing changes in his lifestyle also.

For Noelle Brada-Williams the failures on both their parts reveal:

*The depths of Shobha and Shukumar's common yet isolated experience of grief for their lost child as well as their waning care and love for each other.*⁷

⁶ Eva Tettenborn "Jhumpa Lahiri's Interpreter of Maladies: Colonial Fantasies in "Sexy"" Notes on Contemporary Literature. 32.4 (2002)11.

⁷Noelle Brada-Williams. "Reading jhumpa Lahiri's Interpreter of Maladies as a Short Story Cycle." MELUS, 29.3/4 (2004) 457.

But what is discerned from the story is that though they both share the experience of common grief but the intensity and pattern of it differ from Shobha to Shukumar. Moreover Shukumar's depression and change in lifestyle are caused by more of boredom and lack of stimulus unlike Shobha's.

Nevertheless, one can say that power cut for an hour in the evening for five days appears to bring them together by giving them an opportunity to sit and talk about their life. But when Shobha tells him that she is planning to move out, he gets angry and discloses the sex of the baby he has known all along and has hidden it from Shobha thinking that it would bring more pain to her. Instead of understanding the reason behind her plan, he acts irrationally. Though it turns out well by giving them the chance to grieve together for the terrible loss of their baby and starts life afresh.

The above analysis becomes crucial for its representation of the traumatic condition and its effect on the family. Since the stillbirth, Shobha's life is marked by silence and profound disorder and Shukumar's boredom and anticipation. Shukumar's negligence for almost six months of her condition makes her trauma even worse. Had he taken initiation any sooner to get her out of the world she created for herself by just talking with her instead of remaining indifferent about her growing silence, she would not have decided to move out of his house. So, it is perceived that emotional support or any kind of support to a woman who has experienced a stillbirth is of paramount importance.

Works Cited:

- Brada-Williams, Nelle. "Reading Jhumpa Lahiri's Interpreter of Maladies as a Short Story Cycle." MELUS. 29.3/4(2004): 451-464.
- Deemester, Karen. "Trauma and Recovery in Virginia woolf's Mrs Dalloway." Modern Fiction Studies 44.3(1998): 649-673. Project Muse. Web. 29 May 2013.
- Lahiri, Jhumpa. Interpreter of Maladies. New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1999. Print.
- Ragini, Ramachandra. "Jhumpa Lahiris Interpreter of Maladies." The Journal of Indian Writing in English. 29.1(2001): 50-54.
- Rampersad, Arnold. The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes. New York: Vintage Classics, 1995. Print.
- Tettenborn, Eva. "Jhumpa Lahiri's Interpreter of Maladies: Colonial Fantasies in 'Sexy'" Notes on Contemporary Literature 32.4(2002): 11-12.