A Temporary Matter Study Guide

A Temporary Matter by Jhumpa Lahiri

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Introduction

"A Temporary Matter" was originally published in the *New Yorker* in April 1998 and is the first story in Jhumpa Lahiri's debut collection, *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999). The collection won the 2000 Pulitzer Prize for fiction, a rare achievement for a short-story collection.

The story takes place over five days, beginning March 19, at the suburban Boston home of a

married couple, Shoba and Shukumar. During this week, when they must cope with a one-hour power outage each evening, the grief and alienation that the two have suffered since the stillbirth of their child six months earlier builds to a climax.

Author Biography

Jhumpa Lahiri was born inLondon, England, in 1967. Her parents, natives of Bengal, India, soon moved the family to Rhode Island, where Lahiri grew up. Lahiri's father, Amar, is a librarian at theUniversity of Rhode Island, and her mother, Tia, is a teacher's aide. From childhood, Lahiri made frequent trips toIndia to visit relatives.

After receiving a bachelor's degree in English literature from Barnard College, Lahiri earned master' s degrees in English, creative writing, and comparative studies in literature and the arts, all fromBoston University. She went on to earn a doctorate in Renaissance studies at the same university.

"A Temporary Matter" first appeared in the *New Yorker* in 1998 and was among Lahiri's first published stories. It is the first story in the collection *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999), for which Lahiri won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction in 2000. The collection's title story also won an O. Henry award and the PEN/Hemingway award in 1999.

Lahiri lives inBrooklyn, New York, with her husband, Guatemalan American journalist Alberto Vourvoulias, and their young son, Octavio. Her first novel, *The Namesake,* was published in the fall of 2003.

Plot Summary

The story opens with Shoba, a thirty-three-year-old wife, arriving home at the end of a workday. Her husband, Shukumar, is cooking dinner. Shoba reads him a notice from the electric company stating that their electricity will be turned off from 8 p.m. to 9 p.m. for five consecutive days so that a line can be repaired. The date shown on the notice for the first evening of the outage is today's date, March 19. The notice seems to have been mailed.

The narrator mentions that Shukumar has forgotten to brush his teeth that day and often does not leave the house for days at a time, although Shoba stays out more as time goes on. Then the narrator explains that six months earlier, in September, Shoba had experienced fetal death three weeks before their baby was due. Shukumar, a doctoral student, was inBaltimore for an academic conference at the time, having gone only at Shoba's insistence. Shukumar often thinks of the last time he saw Shoba pregnant, the morning he left for the conference. As he rode away in the taxi, he had imagined himself and Shoba driving in a station wagon with their children.

By the time Shukumar had gotten news of Shoba's premature labor and returned toBoston, their baby had been stillborn.

Now, Shoba leaves early each morning for her proofreading job in the city. After work, she goes to the gym. She also takes on extra projects for work that she does at home during the evenings and weekends. Shukumar stays in bed half the day. Because of the tragedy, his academic advisor has arranged for him to be spared any teaching duties for the spring semester. Shukumar is supposed to be working on his dissertation; instead, he spends most of his time reading novels and cooking dinner.

When Shukumar remarks that they will have to eat dinner in the dark because of the power outage, Shoba suggests lighting candles and goes upstairs to shower before dinner. Shukumar notes that she has left her satchel and sneakers in the kitchen and that since the stillbirth Shoba has "treated the house like a hotel." He brushes his teeth, unwrapping a new toothbrush in the downstairs bathroom. This leads him to recall that Shoba used to be prepared for any eventuality. In addition to having extra toothbrushes for last-minute guests, Shoba had stocked their pantry and freezer with homemade foods. After the stillbirth, she had stopped cooking, and Shukumar had used up all the stored food in the past months. Shukumar also notes that Shoba always keeps her bonuses in a bank account in her own name. He thinks that this is for the best, since his mother was unable to handle her financial affairs when his father died.

The narrator explains that Shoba and Shukumar have been eating dinner separately, she in front of the television set, he in front of the computer. Tonight, they will eat together because of the power outage. Shukumar lights candles, tunes the radio to a jazz station, and sets the table with their best china. Shoba comes into the kitchen as the electricity goes off and the lights go out. She says that the kitchen looks lovely and reminisces about power outages inIndia. She tells Shukumar that at family dinners at

her grandmother's house, when the electricity went off, "we all had to say something"□a joke, a poem, an interesting fact, or some other tidbit. Shoba suggests that she and Shukumar do this, but she further suggests that they each tell the other something they have never revealed before.

Shoba begins the game, telling Shukumar that early in their relationship she peeked into his address book to see if she was in it. Shukumar reveals that on their first date he forgot to tip the waiter, so he returned to the restaurant the next day and left money for him.

The next evening, Shoba comes home earlier than usual. They eat together by candlelight again. Then, instead of each going to a different room, Shoba suggests that they sit outside, since it is warm. Shukumar knows that they will play the game again. He is afraid of what Shoba might tell him. He considers but then discounts several possibilities: that she had an affair, that she does not respect him for still being a student at thirty-five, or that she blames him for being away when she lost the baby.

Shoba tells Shukumar that she once lied to him, saying that she had to work late when actually she went out with a friend. Shukumar tells her that he cheated on an exam many years earlier. He explains that his father had died a few months before and that he was unprepared for the exam. Shoba takes his hand, and they go inside.

The next day, Shukumar thinks all day about what he will tell Shoba next. That evening, he tells her that he returned a sweater she gave him as an anniversary gift and used the money to get drunk in the middle of the day. The sweater was a gift for their third anniversary, and Shukumar was disappointed because he thought it unromantic. Shoba tells Shukumar that at a social gathering with his superiors from the university, she purposely did not tell him that he had a bit of food on his chin as he chatted with the department chairman. They then sit together on the sofa and kiss.

The fourth night, Shoba tells Shukumar that she does not like the only poem he has ever had published. He tells her that he once tore a picture of a woman out of one of her magazines and carried it with him for a week because he desired the woman. They go upstairs and make love.

The next day, Shukumar goes to the mailbox and finds a notice that the electric repairs have been completed early. Shukumar is disappointed, but when Shoba arrives home she says, "You can still light the candles if you want." They eat by candlelight, and then Shoba blows out the candles and turns on the lights. When Shukumar questions this, she tells him that she has something to tell him and wants him to see her face. His heart pounds. He thinks that she is going to tell him that she is pregnant again, and he does not want her to be. She tells him, instead, that she has signed a lease on an apartment for herself.

Shukumar realizes that this revelation has been her planned ending for the game all along. He decides to tell Shoba something he had vowed to himself that he would never tell her. Shoba does not know that Shukumar held their baby at the hospital while she

slept. Shoba does not even know the baby's gender and has said that she is glad that she has no knowledge about the lost child. Shukumar tells Shoba that the baby was a boy and goes on to describe his appearance in detail, including that the baby's hands were closed into fists the way Shoba's are when she sleeps. The two sit at the table together, and each of them cries because of what the other has revealed.

Detailed Summary & Analysis

Summary

"A Temporary Matter" traces the deterioration of a marriage. Over the course of 1 week, during which the husband believes a chance exists to rekindle their love, Shukumar recalls the problems that have caused changes in the way that he and his wife relate to each other.

At the beginning of the story, Shukumar and his wife, Shoba, receive a notice from the electric company telling them that their electricity will be shut off every day for an hour during a 5-day period. The notice calls this a "temporary" problem that will allow the electric company to repair the power lines that went down during the last snowstorm in March. Each night, the electricity will be turned off from eight to nine o'clock. The couple realizes that the repair period will begin that night. Shoba tells her husband that it's a good thing that the electric company informed them about the repairs.

Shoba is 33 years old. She is wearing sweatpants, white sneakers, and a raincoat. Her makeup could use touching up. Although she swore that she would never look like this, she looks this way because she has just returned from the gym. Shukumar thinks about how Shoba looked in the past after they went to a party or a bar if she had been too tired to remove her makeup when they came home.

Shoba thinks the repairs should be done during the day. Shukumar disagrees. He is working on his dissertation on the agrarian revolt in India, and he has worked at home since January. .

Shoba looks at a calendar to be sure about the repair days. She reminds Shukumar that he has a dentist's appointment on Friday. Shukumar runs his tongue over his teeth and realizes that he has forgotten to brush his teeth that day. It isn't the first time. He hasn't left home for days. The more Shoba goes out or works late at the office, the more he wants to stay home.

Six months ago, Shoba encouraged Shukumar to go to an academic conference in Baltimore to develop contacts to use when he enters the job market next year. Shukumar didn't want to go because Shoba was pregnant. Shukumar remembers her waiting with him for the cab that would take him to the airport. During the drive to the airport, he thinks about how large the cab is compared to their car and imagines that one day he and Shoba will have a station wagon to drive their kids around. Before today, Shukumar had anxiety about being a parent because he was 35 years old and still a student. . Today was the first time he welcomed the idea of children.

At the conference someone handed Shukumar a phone number. He knew right away it was the hospital. Shoba had gone into labor 3 weeks early. When he returned to Boston, he found out that the baby was stillborn. Shoba had had a Caesarean, but it

was not performed quickly enough. The doctors told them that Shoba would be back on her feet in a couple of weeks, and there were no signs that she would have trouble having children in the future.

Since the death of the baby, Shoba is already at the office by the time Shukumar wakes up. In her downtown office, Shoba edits textbooks. She has promised to do this for Shukumar's dissertation when it is ready.

Shukumar is envious that Shoba has such a specific skill. He is a mediocre student who absorbs details without further curiosity. He had been dedicated before, but after the baby died he lost his motivation. He is in his sixth year of grad school but nothing seems to push him. Since the death of the baby, he and Shoba have avoided each other, which Shukumar initially thought would pass quickly.

At 7:30 that night Shukumar is preparing dinner. He tells Shoba they will have to eat in the dark because dinner won't be ready until eight o'clock. She suggests they use candles and tells him she is going upstairs to shower before the lights go out. Shukumar moves the bag and shoes that Shoba left lying on the floor. Shoba used to be very tidy, but now she treats the house like a hotel.

Shoba is still organized, though. She tries to prepare for unexpected surprises like sudden guests. When she sees a skirt or blouse she likes, she buys two in case something happens to the first one. She is always careful about putting money away in savings. Shukumar likes this about her. When his father died, his mother fell apart. She abandoned the house Shukumar grew up in and went back to Calcutta, leaving her son to settle everything.

Every other Saturday Shoba and Shukumar went shopping to stock up on an enormous amount of food, but the food never went to waste. When guests visited, Shoba served them meals that seemed like they required half a day's preparation because she used frozen or bottled food. Labelled mason jars line the kitchen shelves with items that Shoba has prepared and bottled. Shukumar went through their supplies steadily as he prepared meals for the two of them. Each afternoon he would go through Shoba's recipe books.. Each recipe was dated, recording the first time they had shared that dish together. He had no memory of eating these meals.

Nevertheless, Shukumar liked cooking. It was the only thing that still made him feel productive, and he knew that if he didn't cook, Shoba would probably eat a bowl of cereal for dinner. Tonight, because there were no lights, they would have to eat together. For months Shukumar had been eating alone in his home office while Shoba ate in the living room as she worked.

Shoba always came to visit Shukumar in his office before going to bed. She would tell him not to work too hard. This was the only time of day that she sought him out, and Shukumar dreaded it because he knew she had to force herself to do it. The office haunted Shoba because it was supposed to be the baby's room. They had decorated it and built a crib for it before Shoba went to the hospital. Shukumar disassembled

everything before she returned home from the hospital, but Shoba still disliked the room. The room didn't bother Shukumar. He turned it into his office in January. The room soothed him, partly because Shoba avoided it.

Shukumar tries to locate candles in the kitchen. All he can find are birthday candles from when Shoba threw him a surprise party last May. There were 120 people at the house, friends and acquaintances that they now avoided. Shoba was in her fifth month, and she and Shukumar held hands all night as they walked among the guests. Since September Shoba's mother had been their only guest. She stayed with them for 2 months after Shoba returned from the hospital. She helped them with cooking, washing clothes, and buying groceries. A religious woman, she would sit before a small shrine and pray twice a day for grandchildren in the future. She worked at a department store in Arizona. She never talked to Shukumar about Shoba. She blamed him for not being at the hospital.

Shukumar finds it strange that there are no candles in the house. Shoba prepares for so many things. Why would she have not prepared for such an ordinary emergency? He looks for something to put the birthday candles in. He finds a pot of ivy and places the candles in the soil. He pushes aside the clutter on the kitchen table, remembering the first meals he and his wife ate there when they were first together and excited to be married. He sets the table, places the ivy pot in the middle, turns on the clock radio, and tunes it to a jazz station.

Shoba comes downstairs wearing a t-shirt, sweatpants, and a robe. It is almost 8. Shukumar puts the food he has prepared on the table. The lights go out, and the radio falls silent. Shukumar lights the birthday candles with a book of matches and opens a bottle of wine. Shoba says everything is lovely. She says it is like India, where the power current disappears for hours at a time. Shoba says that she once went to a rice ceremony in the dark, and Shukumar realizes that their baby would never have this ceremony. Suddenly, he feels irritated that he can't go upstairs and sit at his computer. He struggles to find something to say. There is awkwardness between them, and they were never like this before.

Shoba says that during power failures at her grandmother's house everyone had to take turns speaking, like telling jokes, poems, or facts about the world. Shukumar had not spent as much time in India as Shoba had. His parents, who lived in New Hampshire, left him with his aunt and uncle went they went back to India. The one time that Shukumar went with them, as a baby, he almost died of amoebic dysentery, and his father was afraid to take him again. Shukumar wasn't interested in going to Calcutta until after his father died when he was in his last year of college. Now he wished he had his own childhood stories of India.

Shoba says they should say something to each other in the dark, like tell each other something that the other doesn't know. Shoba tells him that the first time she was in Shukumar's apartment, she looked through his address book to see if he had added her phone number. He hadn't. Shukumar thinks about their first meeting 4 years ago. They met in a lecture hall in Cambridge where Bengali poets were giving a recital. They sat

side by side, and Shukumar got bored quickly because he couldn't understand the literary diction in the poems. Shoba was making a grocery list on the back of a folder.

Shukumar tells Shoba that the first time they went out he forgot to tip the waiter. He took a taxi back to the restaurant the next day to leave the tip with the manager. Shoba asks why he forgot. He says that by the end of dinner he had a felling they might get married and it distracted him. The birthday candles have burnt out, but Shukumar pictures Shoba's face in the dark. The beauty that had once overwhelmed him was fading each day. Her cosmetics seemed necessary now, not to improve her, but to define her.

The next night Shoba comes home earlier than usual. Shukumar bought candles that day for when they have dinner together. They eat before the lights go out at 7. After dinner, Shoba stacks the plates up. Shukumar tells her to not worry about the dishes, but she says that it's almost 8 so it would be silly not to do them.

Shukumar's heart races. He has been waiting for the lights to go out all day. When the lights go out at 8, Shukumar lights the candles. Shoba suggests that they should sit outside. They sit down on the steps of the front porch. There are still patches of snow on the ground but everyone in the neighborhood is outside. The Bradfords, an older couple, walk down the street. The old man calls out to them, asking if they would like to go with them to the bookstore. Shoba and Shukumar say, "No, thank you." Shukumar wonders what Shoba will tell him tonight in the dark. He thinks of the worst possibilities, like she had an affair or that she didn't respect him because he was still a student, but he knows these things aren't true.

Shoba tells him that when his mother was visiting them, she said she had to work late, but she was really having drinks with her friend Gillian. It was Gillian who drove Shoba to the hospital when Shukumar was in Baltimore. Shukumar tells her that he cheated on his Oriental Civilizations exam in college. His father had died a few months before, and during the exam he could see the blue book of the student next to him, so he copied. He feels relieved for having told her this. She turns to him and looks at his shoes, old moccasins. She says he didn't have to tell her that. The Bradfords come back and wave at them. Shukumar and Shoba hold hands as they get up and go back inside the house.

The next day Shukumar spent hours thinking about what he would say to his wife that night. He thinks over his small secrets and shares these with Shoba over the next 2 nights. She shares more of her secrets, too. When the house is dark, they are able to talk to each other again. On the third night they kiss. On the fourth night they have sex for the first time in months.

On the fifth morning Shukumar gets another notice from the electric company. It says that the repairs are ahead of schedule, and there will be no more power outages. He is disappointed. He no longer feels like cooking the dinner he had planned. It isn't the same knowing that the lights will not go out. Nevertheless, he buys the cooking supplies and two bottles of wine. Shoba comes home at 2:30. When Shukumar sees her reading the notice, he knows that it has all come to an end. She says he can still light candles if

he wants to. Shoba is wearing a suit instead of her gym clothes, and her makeup has been touched up recently.

Shoba goes upstairs to change. Shukumar pours the wine and plays a jazz record that Shoba likes. At dinner they eat quietly and drink the first bottle of wine. Before Shukumar can open the second bottle, Shoba blows out the candles. She says she wants him to see her face when she tells him what she is going to tell him. Shukumar is nervous and thinks she might be pregnant again. She says she has been looking for an apartment and found one. She signed the lease today before coming home. She needs some time alone. Shoba won't look at him, but he stares at her. Shukumar feels sick with the knowledge that she has been making these arrangements all this time. The past four evenings she had been preparing for life without him. This was the point of her game of telling secrets.

He tells her the one thing he kept from her when he still loved her. When he arrived at the hospital he saw their baby. It was boy. He describes the way he looked, his hair and weight. The look on her face shows her sorrow.

Shukumar stacks up the plates from dinner and carries them to the sink, but he doesn't run the water. He looks out the window. The Bradfords walk down the street arm in arm. He watches the couple, and the room grows dark. Shukumar turns around. Shoba has turned the lights off. She sits back down at the table. Shukumar follow her and sits down, too. They both weep for the things they now know.

Analysis

"A Temporary Matter" is part of Jhumpa Lahiri's collection of short stories entitled, *Interpreter of Maladies*. In this story the protagonist, Shukumar, tries to mend his relationship with his wife. After suffering the tragedy of losing their newborn child, the couple grows distant. The story's title refers to a notice that the couple receives in the mail informing them that over the next 5 days, the electric company will be making repairs on their street. The repairs cause the temporary nuisance of having no power from 8 to 9 o'clock during these nights. For months Shukumar and his wife have avoided each other in the house. The power outage causes them to be forced into the same room every night. The couple grows closer when the wife, Shoba, suggests they tell each other secrets each night when the lights go out.

The title of the story is symbolic. Although it refers to a power outage, it alludes to the temporary time in which the couple's relationship feels like it used to. Although Shukumar believes that the couple has grown closer over the first 4 days of electrical repairs, his wife has actually been looking for an apartment. She signs a lease and tells him that she is moving out on the fifth night. Shukumar discovers that the repairs are ahead of schedule, and on the fifth night the street will have power. As his wife reads over this notice, he senses that their recent closeness is coming to an end. This foreshadows Shoba's news that she is moving out and thus dissolving their relationship.

Prior to the power outage the couple stays in separate rooms during the waking hours of the day. They both use work to avoid each other. Shukumar works at home in attempt to finish his dissertation. He sets up an office in what used to be the nursery. The room comforts him because he knows that Shoba doesn't like enter it. It brings up too many bad memories for her. The fact that Shukumar seeks out the one place in the house that Shoba avoids, symbolizes how much they have grown apart. In spite of the fact that both Shukumar and Shoba seem to be trying to fix their relationship, the tragedy of a lost child is too much for them to forget. Shoba makes the ultimate decision that she has to be alone to move on with her life. Shukumar is a reminder of the tragic event. Shukumar's take on the relationship is similar. As he spends time with Shoba, his memories take him back through their whole history.

When the lights are out Shoba tells Shukumar about the power outages when she stayed with her grandmother in India. Everyone in the family had to say something to each other. Shoba uses this premise to suggest that she and Shukumar should tell secrets to each other when the lights are out. These confessions draw the two closer together both intellectually and physically. The one thing that Shukumar does not confess to Shoba is that he saw their baby in the hospital before it was cremated. He knows that they had a son.

After Shoba tells him that she is moving out, Shukumar feels betrayed by her. While he assumed their relationship was finally getting back to normal after a long rocky patch, she was preparing for life without him. When he finds out that she signed a lease for an apartment he tells her that he saw their son and describes the baby to her. Shukumar removes himself from the table and Shoba turns the lights off. He goes back to the table, and the couple sits together in the dark. In the last lines of the story the narrator says that the couple weeps for what they both now know. Shoba obviously cries for the reminder of her loss and for knowing more about the child she lost. More important, this statement suggests that the couple has come to know each other better over the last week as they shared their secrets, and it feels as though they are crying over the loss of each other and the loss of their relationship.

Characters

Mr. Bradford

Mr. and Mrs. Bradford are neighbors of Shoba and Shukumar. Shoba and Shukumar see them walking by, arm in arm, on their way to the bookstore on the second night of the power outage. TheBradfords seem to be a happily married couple and as such provide a contrast to Shoba and Shukumar. The narrator mentions that theBradfords placed a sympathy card in Shoba and Shukumar's mailbox when they lost their baby.

Mrs. Bradford

Mr. and Mrs. Bradford are neighbors of Shoba and Shukumar. Shoba and Shukumar see them on the second night of the power outage, and Shukumar sees them again, through the window, on the last evening of the story. The first time theBradfords appear, Mrs. Bradford asks Shoba and Shukumar if they would like to join her and her husband on their walk to the bookstore, but they decline.

Shoba

Shoba is a thirty-three-year-old woman who is married to Shukumar. She is described as tall and broad-shouldered. She seems to have been born in the United States of immigrant parents from India, and she has spent considerable time inIndia visiting relatives. She and her husband now live in a house outsideBoston. Shoba works in the city as a proofreader and also takes on extra projects to do at home. She works out at a gym regularly.

Six months before the time of the story, Shoba's first child was stillborn. This tragedy has changed her habits and her relationship with her husband. While she was formerly a neat and enthusiastic housekeeper and cook, she has become careless about the house and has stopped cooking. The narrator remarks that she previously had the habit of being prepared for anything, from keeping extra toothbrushes on hand for last-minute guests to stocking the freezer and pantry with homemade Indian delicacies.

Shukumar

Shukumar is a thirty-five-year-old doctoral student who is married to Shoba. He is a tall man with a large build. He, too, seems to be an American-born child of Indian immigrants, but he has spent less time inIndia than Shoba has.

Because of the loss of his child six months earlier, Shukumar has been given a semester away from his teaching duties. He is supposed to use the time to focus on writing his dissertation on agrarian revolts inIndia. However, Shukumar accomplishes

little. He stays in bed until midday, doesn't leave the house for days at a time, and often forgets to brush his teeth. He has spent the past months preparing dinners for himself and Shoba using the foods she has stored in the freezer and pantry.

Themes

Grief

The story takes place six months after the stillbirth of Shoba and Shukumar's first child, and the two are still overwhelmed by grief. Shukumar has withdrawn from the world and seldom leaves the house. He stays in bed half the day, unable to summon the energy and concentration to make progress on his dissertation. Shoba, on the other hand, stays away from the house as much as she can. She used to be an attentive housekeeper and enthusiastic cook, but the house seems to remind her of her loss. According to Shukumar, she treats the house as if it were a hotel and would eat cereal for dinner if he did not cook. The narrator also reveals that Shoba and Shukumar no longer go out socially or entertain at home.

People who suffer the loss of a loved one often go through a period of not wanting to go on living themselves. They may feel unable to make the effort required to go about daily life. Sadness may drown out all positive emotions. This seems to be true for this couple, and especially of Shukumar.

Alienation

Shoba and Shukumar's grief has led them to withdraw from each other. Until the nightly power outages began, they avoided each other. Shoba leaves for work early each morning, returns late, and often brings home extra work to occupy her evenings and weekends. When Shoba is home, Shukumar retreats to his computer and pretends to work on his dissertation. He has put the computer in the room that was to be the nursery because he knows that Shoba avoids that room. She comes in briefly each evening to tell him good night. He resents even this brief interaction, which Shoba initiates only out of a sense of obligation.

Shoba and Shukumar do not attempt to comfort or support each other. Each withdraws from the relationship, and they endure their grief as if they were two strangers living in a boardinghouse.

Deception

Through the game that Shoba and Shukumar play of revealing secrets, readers learn that deception has been a theme in their relationship. They have lied to each other, and the lies have been selfish ones□told not to spare the other's feelings but to allow the person telling the lie to escape some discomfort or sacrifice. To avoid having dinner with Shukumar's mother, Shoba lied and said she had to work late. Shukumar told Shoba that he lost a sweater she had given him, when in reality he returned the sweater and used the money to get drunk.

Style

Realism through Details

Lahiri uses dozens of everyday details to create a realistic context in which the story takes place. When Shukumar recalls the morning he left forBaltimore, he remembers that the taxicab was red with blue lettering. When he wakes up each morning, he sees Shoba's "long black hairs" on her pillow. The crib in the nursery is made of cherry wood; the changing table is white with mint-green knobs. Taken together, such details comprise a world that readers find familiar. The realism of the environment makes the characters who live in it and the events that take place in it seem real as well.

Conflicting Clues

As the story unfolds, Lahiri provides readers with two conflicting sets of clues as to how it might end. Each evening Shoba and Shukumar seem to draw closer to each other both emotionally and physically. As they share long withheld secrets, they hold hands, kiss, and finally make love. It seems as if ghosts that have haunted their marriage are being exorcised.

At the same time, the game that appears to be drawing them together also reveals a past filled with deception. Things have not always been as they seemed between these two people. In addition, readers learn early in the story that Shoba has always been one to plan ahead and that she keeps a separate bank account. Readers are left to wonder whether the pattern of deception will be broken or intensified.

The balance seems to shift decisively in favor of a happy ending when, on the fifth evening, the narrator declares, "They had survived a difficult time." Shoba's silence that evening has been interpreted as the calm after a storm. But that interpretation is as misleading as Shoba's behavior has been. Readers, like Shukumar, have been given mixed signals and only learn at the end which set of clues was reliable.

Historical Context

According to the 2000 census, there were nearly 1.7 million Indian Americans in theUnited States at that time. This was more than double the figure for 1990, making Indian Americans the fastest-growing group in the nation. As of 2004, Indian Americans are the third largest group of Asian Americans, after those of Chinese and Filipino origin. California, New York, New Jersey, and Florida are among the states with large numbers of Americans of Indian origin.

Indian Americans are among the best educated and wealthiest of all Americans. In 2000, their median household income was more than $60,000, compared to a median of just over $41,000 for non-Hispanic white Americans. Substantial numbers of Indian Americans work in the high-tech industry and also in various engineering and health care occupations. This is unsurprising givenIndia's strong tradition of education in math and science. In addition, the fact that most Indian immigrants arrive in theUnited States speaking fluent English is an economic advantage. English is one of the official languages of India, a legacy of its long status as a colony ofBritain.

As the number of Indian Americans grows, so does their influence on American culture. Indian foods are increasingly available not only at restaurants□many of them owned by Indian Americans□but also in suburban supermarkets. Many large American cities have at least one Hindu temple. The works of Indian American writers and filmmakers have generally been well received by an American public eager to know more aboutIndia and about Indian Americans, who are more and more likely to be among their neighbors and co workers.

Critical Overview

Interpreter of Maladies, the collection in which "A Temporary Matter" appears, won widespread praise from American critics when it appeared. Besides the nearly universal approval bestowed on the book, the most remarkable feature of the criticism is that nearly every reviewer compared Lahiri to one or more literary predecessors and no two reviewers seem to have linked her with the same writers.

New York Times Book Review critic Caleb Crain declares that "Samuel Richardson's latest heir is Jhumpa Lahiri," a reference toRichardson's eighteenth-century novel *Pamela* in which a household servant is the unwilling object of a wealthy young man's lust. The connection between Lahiri and Richardson is not obvious to all, but Crain also compares Lahiri to Raymond Carver and Ernest Hemingway. "There is nothing accidental about her success," Crain concludes, "her plots are as elegantly constructed as a fine proof in mathematics."

Writing in the *San Francisco Chronicle,* David Kipen sees similarities with Philip Roth and Lan Samantha Chang. Like the former's *Good-Bye, Columbus* and the latter's *Hunger,* Kipen writes, Lahiri's work "transcends mere ethnic exoticism." He praises her use of "simple, familiar tools subtle characterization, meaningful but never portentous detail."

Ellen Emry Heltzel, writing in *The Oregonian,* calls *Interpreter of Maladies* "an impressive start, signaling the arrival of yet another notable Anglo-Indian writer at a time when, in literary circles at least, India is all the rage." The comment is an implied comparison to Bharati Mukherjee, Chitra Divakaruni, and other writers who deal with themes similar to those found in Lahiri's work.

In general, critics inAsia and other non-Western countries have not been as approving as have Americans. Reviewing *Interpreter of Maladies* in *Time International* magazine, Nisid Hajari writes, "At times the three stories that deal with the souring of love. . . read like journal entries, or schematics to the collapse of a relationship. Their declines are almost too measured, too academic to evoke much sympathy or uncontrived sadness." Hajari nevertheless called the collection "assured and powerful " and implies that Lahiri' s next effort may be an improvement.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2

Critical Essay #1

Norvell is an independent educational writer who specializes in English and literature. In this essay, Norvell discusses the story as "the interaction between an active woman and a passive man."

The world that Jhumpa Lahiri creates in "A Temporary Matter" is one in which women are in charge. Women act; men react. This state of affairs is a reversal of traditional gender roles in India, the country from which both Shoba' s and Shukumar' s parents emigrated, and theUnited States. This role reversal gives the story a strongly modern feel.

Both the author and the critics who analyze her work categorize Lahiri along with other female Indian American writers whose work deals with the cultural conflicts faced by immigrants and their children. ButLahiri's stories in general, and this one in particular, do not seem to grapple with cultural issues as much as with gender issues. The dynamic that drives "A Temporary Matter" is the interaction between an active woman and a passive man. It is the kind of situation that today's readers would find credible and compelling whether the characters were children of immigrants or descendants of the Pilgrims.

That Shoba and Shukumar are second-generation Americans of Indian heritage is incidental. They eat Indian food. And when a visit from Shoba's mother is recalled, readers learn that she is a Hindu. But these facts have no impact on how Shoba and Shukumar respond to the loss of their child or behave toward each other. The husband and wife could just as well eat Italian food or fast food, and the visiting mother might just as easily have been a Catholic or a Jew. Shoba and Shukumar are apparently divorced from the religion and traditions of their forebears. Far from struggling to balance two traditions, they have set themselves adrift from all traditions. They are thoroughly modern and secular, and their story could be the story of any educated thirty-something couple.

Freedom from tradition leaves Shoba and Shukumar to work out the terms of their relationship on their own. Individual personalities, free of cultural restrictions, shape their relationship and their lives. And in this marriage, that fact puts Shoba in the driver's seat.

Although Shoba has been changed by the loss of her child, she has found the strength and determination to restart her life. She goes to her job, and she even works out at a gym. She still has the will to plan ahead and to take the initiative; she simply channels her energy in new directions. Instead of stocking the pantry and planning parties, she carefully plans how to extricate herself from her marriage. She initiates a game designed to gradually open a channel of communication between Shukumar and herself that is wide enough to accommodate the message she has to deliver. At the same time, she finds and leases an apartment for herself. Her response to trying circumstances is to set about changing them.

Shukumar, on the other hand, is a passive victim of those same circumstances. He stays in bed late and does not leave the house or even brush his teeth regularly. He rarely initiates interaction with Shoba; instead, he reacts to her action. When she leaves her gym shoes and satchel in the kitchen, he moves them out of his way without saying anything to her. When Shoba suggests that they eat by candlelight, he searches out candles and lights them. When Shoba starts the game of revealing secrets, it becomes the focus of his days. He spends hours thinking about what she might say to him and what he should say to her that evening. While Shoba is out interacting with the world and creating a foundation for her future, Shukumar languishes. He is engaged with neither the present nor the future. In fact, he is paralyzed.

The roles in this marriage, those of the active woman and the passive man, were established long before the tragedy. Early in the story, readers learn that Shukumar finds Shoba's ability to plan ahead astonishing. In a description of their past trips to a farmer's market, Shoba leads him through the crowds and does all the choosing, haggling, and buying. Shukumar is seen "trailing behind her with canvas bags." Shukumar's trip to the conference inBaltimore, which resulted in his being away at the time of the stillbirth, was made at Shoba's insistence. He had not wanted to go, but he did as she told him to.

These incidents and others set the stage for Shoba's manipulation of Shukumar during the week of the power outages. Readers know that Shoba is leading and Shukumar is following long before it is clear where they are going. Shukumar, however, does not even realize that Shoba is leading him until the game has played out.

Shukumar's passive role is not limited to his relationship with his wife. Both Shoba's and Shukumar's mothers make brief appearances in the story through recollections of their visits. Both women share Shoba's active, independent nature, and both dominate and intimidate Shukumar.

Shoba's mother is an immigrant, born and brought up in a Hindu society in which wives were expected to be humble and obedient servants to their husbands. Men led; women followed. Shoba's mother lives in Arizona now. Perhaps not coincidentally, her husband□Shoba's father□is not mentioned. It is unclear whether he is still living.

Shoba's mother comes to stay for two months after the stillbirth. Although her practice of Hinduism links her to the culture in which she was brought up, she is surprisingly modern and self-sufficient. Not only does she cook dinner every night, as Shoba once did, she also "drove herself to the supermarket. " This is more remarkable than it might seem. In another of Lahiri's stories, a Hindu housewife a generation younger than Shoba's mother is not able to drive. Readers learn, too, that Shoba's mother once held a job in a department store.

In traditional Indian society, a woman often goes from being a young wife in a subservient position in her father-in-law's household to being an elderly widow in a subservient position in her son-in-law's household. Therefore, Shoba's mother could be expected to treat Shukumar with deference. But there is nothing subservient or

deferential about this woman. Although she is generally polite to Shukumar, when he mentions the death of his child, Shoba's mother says to him accusingly, "But you weren't even there."

Less is revealed about Shukumar's mother. She, too, continues to observe the religious traditions of her homeland. Her visit to Shoba and Shukumar's home is timed to mark the twelve-year anniversary of Shukumar's father's death. What is notable is that Shukumar's mother comes for a two-week stay during which she imposes upon Shukumar, in his own home, certain traditions that mean nothing to him. Further, Shukumar dreads having dinner with his mother without Shoba there "to say more of the right things because he came up with only the wrong ones." Clearly, Shukumar is intimidated by his mother's power to impose her will upon him and by her habit of finding fault with him. Once again, Shukumar is at the mercy of a powerful, take-charge woman.

What lies at the heart of this story is neither a conflict between cultures nor a power struggle between the genders. The two sides are not evenly matched enough to make for a struggle. Although Shukumar hurts Shoba in the end by revealing a devastating secret, he is like a wounded animal whose lashing out is impulsive and, ultimately, ineffectual. Given what has transpired between Shoba and Shukumar, readers have no doubt that she will recover from the blow and make a life for herself. Shukumar's fate is much more uncertain.

Source: Candyce Norvell, Critical Essay on "A Temporary Matter," in *Short Stories for Students,* Gale, 2004.

Critical Essay #2

Remy is a freelance writer in Pensacola, Florida. In the following essay, Remy examines Jhumpa Lahiri's use of irony in "A Temporary Matter. "

"A Temporary Matter," the first story in Jhumpa Lahiri's debut Pulitzer Prize-winning collection *Interpreter of Maladies,* captures a pivotal moment in a couple's relatively short but eventful marriage. At times absurdly funny, at others heartbreakingly sad, Lahiri's tale examines how a tragic loss can lead to indifference and a breakdown in communication between two people who once loved each other. The author's use of irony in various forms makes the transition even more poignant, for it underscores an element of suspense as it brings about the story's denouement.

Lahiri increases the ironic quality of the story by setting up a situation in which the emotionally distant couple must interact more closely. Because the utility company will turn off the electricity for one hour each night for five consecutive nights to make repairs after a recent snowstorm, Shoba and Shukumar, deprived of their usual distractions, must turn to each other for companionship. To heighten her characters' isolation, Lahiri informs the reader that it is only the houses on the "quiet, tree-lined streets" that experience the nightly power outages and not the shops near the trolley stop.

Although the utility company assures the residents of the neighborhood that the inconvenience is only "a temporary matter," the blackout has a transforming effect on the neighborhood and its residents. Despite the cold, neighbors chat with one another as they stroll up and down the street carrying flashlights. The darkness and cold, fresh air instill a restless feeling while enforcing a sense of community. "Tonight, with no lights, they would have to eat together," says the narrator, describing the situation inside Shoba and Shukumar's house. The power outage forces a change in routine□from voluntary separation to forced interaction.

Ever since the loss of their child in September, Shoba and Shukumar have lived separate lives under the same roof. Within the span of only a few months, they have constructed for themselves a routine structured on the avoidance of each other and the horrible truth that has changed their married life forever. In an effort to delay her homecoming and an inevitable confrontation with her husband, Shoba spends long hours at work and at the gym. Shukumar, on the other hand, remains ensconced on the third floor, ostensibly writing his dissertation. Both husband and wife are depressed, and neither is willing to acknowledge that their marriage has lost something vital, something more than just romance.

Until recently, Shoba had always been neat and tidy, but now she deposits her briefcase in the middle of the hall and leaves her clothes strewn about the room; she is so weary that she does not even bother to untie her shoes before removing them. At thirty-three, she looks "like the type of woman she'd once claimed she would never resemble. " Shoba's slightly rumpled appearance reminds Shukumar of a time when she was more

carefree and all "too eager to collapse into his arms." Alas, those days are no more, and her rumpled appearance reveals a different attitude toward Shukumar.

The relationship has deteriorated to the point that Shukumar never leaves the house, not even to retrieve the mail, and sleeps until it is almost lunch-time, drinking coffee Shoba had brewed earlier that morning. He cannot find the motivation he needs to finish his dissertation but reads novels instead. Everything in his life seems to have lost color, vibrancy. The love he once felt for Shoba has lost its ardor, for he sees her beauty fading. "The cosmetics that had seemed superfluous were necessary now, not to improve her but to define her somehow." The woman he once loved has disappeared and with her his own passion.

What proves even more ironic is that Shukumar's growing alienation toward his wife is exacerbated by the knowledge that it is reciprocated. The couple has reached a stalemate, an impasse that has quickly led to indifference. The two live separate lives, yet they pretend to participate in a marriage. When Shoba finally stops in to greet him at night, Shukumar tries to look busy. "Don't work too hard," says Shoba ironically, aware, perhaps, that the dissertation is not progressing smoothly. Shukumar seeks to escape his wife's attention by moving his office to the nursery, a place Shoba avoids. "It was the one time in the day she sought him out, and yet he'd come to dread it. He knew it was something she forced herself to do." Shoba and Shukumar occupy separate floors of the house, masquerading as a couple□that is, until the lights go out.

In addition to highlighting the couple's estrangement, the power outage adds an element of suspense as it draws the characters' differences sharply into focus. Eating dinner that first night in the dim glow of birthday candles which Shukumar must light constantly, Shoba is reminded of the power failures she experienced as a child inIndia. To pass the time, her grandmother would have Shoba and the other members of her family tell a joke, recite a fact, or tell a story for all to enjoy. Wishing to break the awkward silence between her and her husband, Shoba suddenly has the idea that she and Shukumar should pass the evening in the same manner, the only difference being that they must tell each other something they've never told before. While it is ironic that they never thought to make such personal revelations until the lights go out, the idea of a married couple divulging their deepest secrets to each other adds an air of mystery to the darkness that surrounds them and heightens the suspense of what will actually be revealed.

Upon hearing his wife's idea, Shukumar observes that Shoba "hadn't appeared so determined in months," unaware of the real purpose behind her suggestion. An air of suspense enhances the story further as Shukumar reluctantly agrees to play the game even though he doesn' t have a childhood story aboutIndia to share. "What didn't they know about each other?" he thinks, foreshadowing the story's conclusion. Thus, Lahiri enhances the story's ironic quality by creating a situation whereby her characters, isolated in darkness yet sustained by the customs of their native land, must confront each other with the truth.

At first the revelations are harmless and insignificant. They involve minor intrusions of privacy or lapses in thought, white lies told in brief moments of selfishness, or desperate, unconscious attempts to preserve one's sense of dignity. With each night that passes, the truths that Shoba and Shukumar exchange become bolder and more honest as the couple struggles to relate and communicate. "Somehow, without saying anything, it had turned into this. Into an exchange of confessions□*the little ways* they'd hurt or disappointed each other, and themselves" (emphasis added).

As the nightly game progresses, Shukumar contemplates what he should say to his wife. He seems happy to at last be relieved of the secrets that have burdened him for so long. He is so happy, in fact, that he cannot decide the order in which to make his confessions. Moreover, the thought of what Shoba will say next excites him, creating a sense of anticipation which the reader shares. Each revelation appears to bring them closer together (though, as the story's ironic conclusion demonstrates, any hope of a reunion is beyond reach). "Something happened when the house was dark," says the narrator. "They were able to talk to each other again." This improved communication between Shoba and Shukumar inspires displays of affection long absent from their marriage. She is kind and patient with him, holding his hand in hers to show understanding, whereas he takes even more pride in planning and preparing the meals they now enjoy by candlelight. On the third night, Shoba and Shukumar kiss awkwardly on the sofa like a couple exploring each other's bodies for the first time. On the fourth night, they climb the stairs to bed and make love "with a desperation they had forgotten," apparently having forgiven each other for their acts of neglect and selfishness.

But, on the morning of the fifth night, they receive a notice from the utility company stating that the repairs have been completed early, signaling an end to their apparently rekindled romance. "I suppose this is the end of our game," Shukumar says when he sees Shoba reading the notice. It is ironic that Shukumar should make this statement, because he doesn' t know the half of it, for the period of harmony and affection that Shoba and Shukumar have experienced is, like the power outage that brought it about, "a temporary matter," the calm before the storm□the one that heralds the end of their marriage. Together, they have played a game in which they have pretended to want the same things when neither one of them has had the courage to state the obvious: their marriage is over. Moreover, the loss of their child has proved insurmountable, for neither spouse is willing to suffer that kind of pain and sorrow again. "Only he didn' t want her to be pregnant again," the narrator says as Shukumar anxiously awaits Shoba's final declaration. "He didn't want to have to pretend to be happy."

As she prepares to make her final revelation, Shoba changes the candlelight ritual, insisting that they leave the lights on, moving them at once to a less intimate but more vulnerable position, since neither is able to hide: "I want you to see my face when I tell you this," she says gently, though she refuses to look him in the eye.

When Shoba tells Shukumar that she has signed a lease for an apartment onBeacon Hill, he understands immediately that the confessions they've made recently have served as a preamble for a far more disingenuous revelation. Shoba has not made her

confessions in an attempt to restore their relationship but to prepare herself for a transition to a more independent life. Lahiri uses suspense to heighten the irony of the scene as the reader anticipates Shukumar's reaction.

It sickened Shukumar, knowing that she had spent these past evenings preparing for a life without him. He was relieved and yet he was sickened. This was what she'd been trying to tell him for the past four evenings. This was the point of her game.

The irony of their situation is painfully clear to see. The "little ways" in which they have disappointed each other have become for Shukumar acts of betrayal, leading to Shoba's final act of betrayal.

But Shoba, in making her latest revelation, has unwittingly brought about a reversal in power□the power to wound□which Shoba thinks is hers exclusively. As though the game were continuing, Shukumar counters Shoba's announcement with one of his own that proves devastating in the end.

Though the death of their child has been difficult for Shoba to accept, there is also an undercurrent of resentment, as expressed by her mother, that the loss would have been somewhat easier to bear had Shukumar been at the hospital for the delivery. Shoba believes that she has experienced her loss alone. Moreover, she seeks consolation in the thought that the baby's gender has remained unknown, therefore preventing her from forming too deep an attachment to her dead child, for, when an ultrasound was taken, Shoba declined the doctor's offer to know the child's sex. "In a way she almost took pride in her decision, for it enabled her to seek refuge in a mystery," says the narrator. But now Lahiri adds a twist, making the revelation that, although Shoba "assumed it was a mystery for him, too," Shukumar knew. Ironically, now it is Shukumar who has the power to wound.

Thus the stage is set for Shukumar's final, heartbreaking revelation. "There was something he'd sworn he would never tell her, and for six months he had done his best to block it from his mind," says the narrator, yet the present circumstances weaken Shukumar' s resolve to the breaking point. Contrary to what Shoba and her mother believe, Shukumar arrived at the hospital shortly after the baby was born, only to find his wife asleep, and was then taken to see their child with the hope that "holding the baby might help him with the process of grieving." That day Shukumar "promised himself . . . that he would never tell Shoba, because he still loved her then, and it was the one thing in her life that she had wanted to be a surprise." Shoba's decision to move out makes her husband realize that their marriage is, indeed, loveless. There is nothing left to bind him to his promise. Shoba, who is "the type to prepare for surprises, good and bad," finds herself unprepared for the biggest surprise of all.

When Shukumar describes for Shoba how he had held their son, his tiny fingers "curled shut" like hers while she sleeps, he sees his wife's face "contorted with sorrow," for, though she has initiated their separation, she fully comprehends the loss that has engulfed them. Without a word, she turns out the lights and sits down at the table,

where Shukumar joins her. "They wept together," says the narrator, "for the things they now knew."

This poignant scene, at once tender and yet filled with an abandonment marked by despair, could not have been rendered as artfully had the author not led up to the ironic conclusion by delineating the emotional predicament of her characters and creating a sense of suspense in the reader about what would happen to their marriage. In the hands of an author less skilled than Jhumpa Lahiri, the result would have been cool detachment rather than one of profound empathy.

Source: David Remy, Critical Essay on "A Temporary Matter," in *Short Stories for Students,* Gale, 2004.

Topics for Further Study

Shoba recalls visits to her grandmother's house inCalcutta. Do research to learn about living conditions inCalcutta for people at various economic levels. What do you think Shoba's grandmother's house was like? What kinds of memories might Shoba have of her visits there, besides those of power outages?

A theme that runs throughout Lahiri's body of work is that of the challenges faced by immigrants and children of immigrants who must strive to meld two cultures in their lives. Does this theme appear in "A Temporary Matter"? Explain your answer.

What is your opinion of Shoba and her actions toward Shukumar? Specifically, what do you think of the way she chose to tell Shukumar that she was leaving him? Was she trying to spare his feelings by breaking the news gently, or was she being manipulative and unfair?

Do research to learn about the challenges faced by couples who suffer the tragedy of a stillborn child. Shoba and Shukumar's marriage does not survive their loss. How common is this? What are some other difficulties that such couples may face, and what do medical professionals recommend to help prevent or minimize them?

Lahiri included in the story brief descriptions of both Shoba's and Shukumar's mothers. She accomplished this by having the narrator recall a visit from each woman. Why do you think Lahiri included these recollections? What do they add to the story?

As these examples of deception are revealed throughout the story, it is clear that Shoba and Shukumar's emotional estrangement began before the loss of their baby. They have always dealt with difficult situations and unpleasant emotions by lying and keeping secrets. When Shoba breaks the stalemate that their grief has caused by initiating a deceptive game, she is following an established pattern. Throughout the week of power outages, Shoba appears to be reaching out to Shukumar. In truth, she is engineering her final separation from him.

What Do I Read Next?

Lahiri's first novel, *The Namesake* (2003), is a story that began with an incident in the author's childhood. In her parents' Bengali culture, each child has two names, a pet name used by family and friends and a "good name" used more formally. Lahiri's first American teacher found her good name too difficult and began using the private, pet name without understanding how inappropriate this was. The incident was such a powerful example of the cultural dissonance experienced by immigrants and children of immigrants that Lahiri made it the starting point of her novel.

The Unknown Errors of Our Lives: Stories (2002) is a collection of nine stories with female protagonists. Its author, Chitra Divakaruni, is an American immigrant fromIndia who explores the same issues as does Lahiri, but from the point of view of the older generation born abroad.

The Middleman and Other Stories (1988), by Bharati Mukherjee, won the National Book Critics Circle Award for fiction in 1988. It is the first story collection published by Mukherjee, who continues to be a prolific writer. The stories deal with the experiences of immigrants to theUnited States from many nations.

Flannery O'Connor: The Complete Stories (1971) is a collection of all thirty-one short stories by O'Connor, who is widely considered one of the best American short story writers. Lahiri has mentioned O'Connor as a writer whom she admires.

Finding the Center: Two Narratives (1984) contains two personal narratives by Nobel Prize-winning author V. S. Naipaul. Naipaul was born and reared in Trinidad (where his parents had immigrated to from India), and moved toLondon as a young man. The challenge of straddling cultures is a theme that pervades Naipaul's work and links it to Lahiri's. "Prologue to an Autobiography, " the first narrative in *Finding the Center,* explores this theme in some detail.

Further Study

Bala, Suman, *Jhumpa Lahiri, the Master Storyteller: A Critical Response to "Interpreter of Maladies,"* Khosla Publishing House, 2002.

Indian literary scholar Suman Bala has collected thirty essays by Indian critics and scholars discussing Lahiri's story collection. The volume is valuable in providing Western readers with Indian perspectives on Lahiri's work.

Jayapal, Pramila, *Pilgrimage: One Woman's Return to a ChangingIndia,* Seal Press, 2000.

Jayapal was born in Madras in southern India, grew up in Indonesia and Singapore, and came to theUnited States as a teenager to complete her education. At the age of thirty, Jayapal returned toIndia for two years with a fellowship that allowed her to travel throughout the country and write about her experiences and observations. Jayapal is an international development specialist, and her narrative is a mixture of scholarly observation and personal narrative□the latter including the hair-raising tale of her son's birth. The book is a useful portrait ofIndia today.

Patel, Vibhuti, "Maladies of Belonging," in *Newsweek International,* September 20, 1999, p. 8.

In this wide-ranging interview published soon after the publication of *Interpreter of Maladies,* Lahiri answers questions about her relationship toIndia and her approach to writing.

Zimbardo,Xavier, *India Holy Song,* Rizzoli, 2000.

Lahiri wrote the foreword to this book of photographs taken throughoutIndia over a fifteen-year period. The forward tells of her childhood visits to Calcutta and her responses toIndia.

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BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Short Stories for Students (SSfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, SSfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of SSfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of SSfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in SSfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by SSfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

SSfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Short Stories for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Short Stories for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Short Stories for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from SSfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from SSfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Short Stories for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Short Stories for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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