

**Feminist Writings**  
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**A Temporary Matter - Part 3**

So, hello and welcome to this NPTEL course entitled Feminist Writing. So, we are looking at Jhumpa Lahiri's short story A Temporary Matter. We have already started with this text, and we have sort of gone to a certain extent into the narrative, and we talked about how the stylistic feature of Lahiri's writing in forms the content of the writing.

In terms of looking at the meticulous details, which are foregrounded by the objects, the ordinary objects which are foregrounded in a way that it connects with the broader more accentual and more experiential, you know narratives inside the story. So the furniture for instance, or spaces for instance, little details like kitchenware, the fridge, the refrigerator, the vehicle, the cars, all these little objects, these ordinary domestic objects become symbolic in quality, while still retaining they object status.

So, that is the very interesting balance which Lahiri creates in the fiction where objects become symbolic as well as remaining objects on right. Of course, the whole point is to connect to the broader existential narrative. So, how do objects relate to the psychological situatedness of the characters at any given point of time, so for instance when you talk about that little experience of Shukumar finding himself dwarfed in a station wagon, despite his 6 feet height.

And then you know, imagining the position in time, a point of time later where he would have to buy a station wagon while drive his family to different exertion, different activities, so that becomes, car then becomes a capsule of hope, little capsule of possibilities, pleasant positive possibilities, which are imagined in Shukumar's mind in any given point.

And of course, the car still remains the car, as well as becoming a vehicle of symbolic in quality. And you can say that about many objects in the story. The bare refrigerator for instance where it is just a calendar, and that too not a very used calendar.

There is nothing else in the refrigerator at all. So the bare quality of the refrigerator, the minimalist quality of the refrigerator is indicative of the psychological situation, the

situatedness, the location of the house, which is one of lightness, numbness, for this massive absence which has been produced by the dead child.

So, you know this story is very important because the way, and the reason why we are looking at the story from a perspective of feminist writing is because we are seeing a female character undergoing a transition which is experiential of course, and which is emerging out of an experience of loss.

Now, you can connect this in a very interesting way to Sylvia Plath's because even there you find an experience of loss, emanating from a medical space, or experience in medical space, and how that informs the characters situatedness, mental and psychological situatedness in any given point of time. And that too is a very graphic, and to is very-very symbolic in quality, and similar kind of a narrative designed is used in this story as well.

Now as a result of which domestic spaces become very symbolic in quality. So for instance, the point in which we ended the last lecture where Shukumar has created this nursery for the child, the arrival of the child, so there was nursery with wallpapers and different kind of children's toys and swings, and little gadgets the child would play with. And that of course had to be tragically disassembled when the child was born dead, when the child did not appear. That was devastating loss, devastating tragedy, a human tragedy.

And that of course immediately informs the spatial narrative, the spatial design of the house which is redesigned almost dramatically, and very tragically. And that was converted into Shukumar's study, it was converted into his desk. Now interestingly you find that, that space which is a space of absence essentially, where the nursery in which the child did not arrive, that absent space, or the space of absence becomes Shukumar's study and he finds himself completely unproductive in that space.

So, the unproductivity, the academic unproductivity of Shukumar in that particular space, may be some of the extension, an existential extension if you will of the absence of the child. So it is the continuation of absence, it is the continuation of non-productivity, it is the continuation of that, that sense of blankness, that sense of numbness which is created by that particular space.

And of course, we see how simple verbs are used in a very symbolic way in the story, like for instance we are told that every evening Shobha visits Shukumar in study. Now, I have

explained this, and talked about this in early lecture but I will still say it again, and that is the whole idea of visiting someone can also imply a distance between them.

Like you can only visit someone who you are separated from, by a physical distance. So despite living in the same house, despite sharing the same house they are like visitors to each other. And the word hotel had come once, the word visitor, the word guest had come once, as all these words can be connected together into forming a narrative over here.

We are told that Shobha feels as if she is living in a hotel, so it is not really a home for her anymore. And you know the whole idea of disintegration that we see in the story, disintegration of communication, the crises of communication, the entire lapse of communication, the fall in communication, all that sort of emanates from the absent child.

All that emanates from the non-arrival of the child, the dead child, sort of deadness of the child becomes a brooding spectral presence in the story, and that sort of informs other absences, which operate in the story at any given point of time.

So we see, and the point we would start of today, we will see how the candle light dinner that two people would share from this point of time, it becomes a compulsion, it becomes a necessary activity, not really a romantic activity, it becomes a necessary activity, because of the power cuts which are happening, because of some repair work going on in that neighborhood.

So as a result of power cut there would be an interruption of power supply, from 8-9 every evening, this is the time when they have dinner. And so the candle light dinner, becomes the whole idea, the whole stereotypical idea around candle light dinner becomes problematized, gets reconfigured quite dramatically.

And now we see at this point of time, how the whole idea of power cut is so special in quality as well. Because we are about to be told the experience of power cuts in Calcutta when Shukumar had experienced it as a child growing up in Calcutta, and something I can relate to personally as well.

And that idea of power cuts in Calcutta, which is about heat, and mosquitoes, and the whole inconvenience of having this massive power cuts, for massive amount of time is contrasted

with the power cut over here, where people are informed in advanced, that it is just going to be one hour of interruption of power supply.

But that at some point of time we find, the contrast becomes also what connects. That is something we find a lot in diasporic fiction, where things which are seemingly contrasting with each other, seemingly, completely opposite of each other, they become sort of ontological extensions of each other. So you know it becomes a very interesting continuation, opposites become continuation, contrast becomes connects, in the psychological situatedness of the diasporic imagination. So, we will see how that happens in the story as we move on.

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January, when he stopped working at his carrel in the library, he set up his desk there deliberately, partly because the room soothed him, and partly because it was a place Shoba avoided.

Shukumar returned to the kitchen and began to open drawers. He tried to locate a candle among the scissors, the eggbeaters and whisks, the mortar and pestle she'd bought in a bazaar in Calcutta, and used to pound garlic cloves and cardamom pods, back when she used to cook. He found a flashlight, but no batteries, and a half-empty box of birthday candles. Shoba had thrown him a surprise birthday party last May. One hundred and twenty people had crammed into the house — all the friends and the friends of friends they now systematically avoided. Bottles of vinho verde had nested in a bed of ice in the bathtub. Shoba was in her fifth month, drinking ginger ale from a martini glass. She had made a vanilla cream cake with custard and spun sugar. All night she kept Shukumar's long fingers linked with hers as they walked among the guests at the party.

Since September their only guest had been Shoba's mother. She came from Arizona and stayed with them for two months after Shoba returned from the hospital. She cooked dinner every night, drove herself to the supermarket, washed their clothes, put them away. She was a religious woman. She set up a small shrine, a framed picture of a lavender-faced goddess and a plate of marigold petals, on the bedside table in the guest room, and prayed twice a day for healthy grandchildren in the future. She was polite to Shukumar without being friendly. She folded his sweaters with an expertise she had learned from her job in a department store. She replaced a missing button on his winter coat and knit him a beige and brown scarf, presenting it to him without the least bit of ceremony, as if he had only dropped it and hadn't noticed. She never talked to him about Shoba; once, when he mentioned the baby's death, she looked up from her knitting, and said, "But you weren't even there."

It struck him as odd that there were no real candles in the house. That Shoba hadn't prepared for such ordinary emergency. He looked now for something to put the birthday candles in and settled on the soil



So, Shukumar returned to the kitchen and began to open the drawers, he tried to locate a candle among the scissors, the egg beaters, and the whisk. The mortar and pestle she had bought in a bazaar in Calcutta. And he used to pound garlic cloves, and cardamom pods back when she used to cook.

So you know we find the objects in the drawer important because we find this whole idea of mortar and pestle, which is a very traditional Bengali utensil for grounding spices, that is something which is there, which is bought from a bazaar of Calcutta. And that finds itself in the drawer in Boston, in US.

So, again the whole idea, the whole metonymic idea of the objects, the little metonymic objects which have travelled across time, which have travelled across spaces, that becomes very interesting in the diasporic imagination, because that is the way in which diasporic

imagination connects or keeps connect back to the past. In a way which is very-very existential and experiential in quality.

He found a flashlight, but no batteries, and a half empty box of birthday candles. Again very symbolic, a half empty box of birthday candles, seems to suggest that there have been no further birthdays and half empty box, this is not a full empty box, whereby you need to buy a new empty box. So you don't need to buy a box of birthday candles because in previous books it is half empty and that is just going to stay like this for a while, again the liminal quality is very-very important in the story.

We have talked about how the season becomes important projection of the liminality, it is March and it is beginning to become warm, it is beginning to become less cold, the winter is about to go away, but at the same time we find remnants of snow in the neighborhood, there is still stretches of snow, lines of snow in the neighborhood, which is suggestive with the fact that winter is still there with some kind of spectral presence.

One can look at the spectral presence of winter in connection to the spectral presence of dead child in the story, it just refuse to go, it just stays there as a brooding spectral presence throughout the narrative, and we find that similar.

Again this is something which happens a lot in certain kind of fiction where the hysteria, the eternal season, the external landscape, external projected landscape out there becomes very interestingly dialogic with the mindscape of the characters, with the imagination of the character in a way. Okay, that is a very important connect that Lahiri keeps making throughout the story.

So the half empty box of birthday candle becomes an important symbolic material, metonymic material there. Shobha has thrown in a surprise birthday party last May, 120 people had crammed into the house, all the friends and friends of friends which they now systematically avoided. Again contrast is very-very stopped, Shobha had thrown a surprise birthday party for Shukumar last May and 120 people were there in the house.

So, again the house was populated with people, house was populated with friends and friends of friends, so it was all about warmth and festivity, and happiness and all kind of possibilities, and hope because Shobha was pregnant with the child, so they were looking forward to possibilities. Looking forward with optimism to the arrival of child, etc.

Friends, and Friends of friends and then we are told that these are people they now systematically avoid, they have cut themselves off complete from the people and they find themselves, I mean they have eliminated themselves quite systematically and quite deliberately post the tragedy of child loss. Bottles of vinho verde had nested in the bed of ice and bath tub. Shobha was in her fifth month, drinking ginger ale from the martini glass. Again little details are so important in Lahiri's fiction.

Shobha was in her fifth month, so obviously she couldn't drink alcohol, she was drinking of a martini glass, she was drinking ginger ale, and then of course, she had made a vanilla cream cake with custard and sponge sugar. Whole night she kept Shukumar's long fingers linked with her they walked among the guest in the party.

So, it becomes an image of perfect connection, perfect festivity, perfect happiness, perfect warmth, and perfect intimacy. So, you know, this whole idea of keeping her finger linked with Shukumar's finger as they walked through the guest in the party all evening, the little fingers connected together, the little fingers curled up together, that becomes a very symbolic image of intimacy warmth, love, romance, and connect.

Obviously the point of this information which Lahiri is giving us is that there is big contrast to the dramatic disconnect they have at this present point of time, where they barely talk to each other, they barely make eye contact, they barely know each other, they have become strangers to each other completely, right?

So that constant flashbacks of time, where we have images of fertility, fecundity, festivity, happiness, intimacy, warmth, all that is dramatically done, deliberately done and contrasted with different images, that present that corresponds to present images, so bare in system, images of minimalist in system, images of disintegration, images of crises in communication, images of estrangement, elimination etc.

So that image of Shobha being in her fifth month, walking with Shukumar with her fingers in Shivkumar's hands and Shukumar's fingers walking to a crowd of people who have just come to celebrate and wish them well, 120 people, that becomes a perfect image of happiness, a perfect image of possibilities, pleasant positive possibilities which is what they is completely contrast to what they experience now, as a strange couple.

And then we are given a sentence which serves to dramatize the contrast, that is since September, the only guest had been Shobha's mother, she came from Arizona and stayed with us for 2 months, after Shobha returned from the hospital. She cooked dinner every night, drove herself to the supermarket, washed the clothes, put them away, she was religious women, she set up a small shrine, a framed picture of a lavender faced goddess and a plate of marigold petals on the bedside table in the guest room and prayed twice a day for healthy grandchildren in the future.

She was polite to Shukumar without being friendly. She folded his sweaters with an expertise she had learned from a job in a departmental store, she replaced the missing button on his winter coat and knit them on her beige and brown scarf presenting it to him without least bit of ceremony as if it had only dropped it, he had only dropped it and haven't noticed.

She never talked to him about Shobha once when he mentioned baby is dead, she looked up from knitting and said but you weren't even there. And that is another very important feature in Lahiri's vision, characters who are seemingly peripheral they just come in and they convey a lot, they communicate a lot, so we have example of Shobha's mother over here.

And we are told that she is superefficient, that she has spent a good deal of her life working in a departmental store, so she knows exactly what to do in terms of household shores, she is deeply religious, she has got a shrine in the part of the house, and she prays for healthy grandchildren in the future.

We are also told that she will take care of everything, she will drive to supermarket, to the laundry, put all the clothes to dry, then she notices smallest details, she notices missing buttons in Shukumar's coat, and then she replaces them with energy and efficiency which is remarkable.

However, despite all this, despite all that superficial efficiency, and the massive skill set that she has, in terms of doing household chores, we are also told that this a complete gap in communication between her and Shukumar, because the only time in which he mentioned the baby's death to her, Shukumar mentioned baby's death to her. She looked out from her knitting and told her point blank, "But you weren't even there."

This obviously carries a lot of acquisition, this carries a lot of, it rings with acquisition, it is very deep and deep seated and grievance, acquisition, etc. But that doesn't stop her from her efficiency. That doesn't stop her from her domestic duties as the mother-in-law in the house.

And that character becomes very important presence in the story, because that character is an extension, perhaps an anticipation in a certain way of the imminent collapse in communication that they about to experience as couples, right? The insertion of character is important because despite being peripheral, despite being seemingly non-central to the narrative she conveys, she seems to anticipate in a way, or she embodies the anticipation of the crises of communication between these people.

Because we are just told in a paragraph before this that they had a perfect relationship, they had a perfect marriage, they cared for each other, they loved each other, they were preparing for life of togetherness with arrival of child and all that have been destroyed in a blink of a second with the arrival, with the child being born dead.

And then of course everything seems to collapse and disintegrate after that. So you can do an interesting contrast of this, not a contrast but a comparison between this and what happens in Catherine Mansfield short story *The Fly* which we covered at some point in this course, with the sudden death of the boss's son which essentially collapses everything.

Which collapses the entire machinery of the boss in a way, that is something which begins to disintegrate the boss, experientially and existentially. And we have a similar kind of experiential and existential disintegration happening in the story over here.

So, that peripheral character, that seemingly unborn character, Shobha's mother, Shukumar's mother-in-law comes in and goes away from the narrative, but she conveys a lot in terms of efficiency, domesticity, superficial politeness, the lack of warmth, the lack of genuine human connect, and of course a deep seated regret, deep seated acquisition, a deep seated grievance against the son-in-law for not being there when the child was about to be born.



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guests are from a multi-glass, she had made a vanilla cream cake with custard and spun sugar. All night she kept Shukumar's long fingers linked with hers as they walked among the guests at the party.

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It struck him as odd that there were no real candles in the house. That Shoba hadn't prepared for such an ordinary emergency. He looked now for something to put the birthday candles in and settled on the soil of a potted ivy that normally sat on the windowsill over the sink. Even though the plant was inches from the tap, the soil was so dry that he had to water it first before the candles would stand straight. He pushed aside the things on the kitchen table, the piles of mail, the unread library books. He remembered their first meals there, when they were so thrilled to be married, to be living together in the same house at last, that they would just reach for each other foolishly, more eager to make love than to eat. He put down two embroidered place mats, a wedding gift from an uncle in Lucknow, and set out the plates and wineglasses they usually saved for guests. He put the ivy in the middle, the white-edged, star-shaped leaves girded by ten little candles. He switched on the digital clock radio and tuned it to a jazz station.

"What's all this?" Shoba said when she came downstairs. Her hair was wrapped in a thick white towel. She undid the towel and draped it over a chair, allowing her hair, damp and dark, to fall across her back. She walked absently toward the stove she took out a few tandoes with her fingers. She wore a clean pair



And we cut back to the present. It struck him as odd that there were no real candles in the house, that Shobha hadn't prepared for such an ordinary emergency, he will look now for something to put the birthday candles in and settled on the soil of a potted ivy that normally sat on the windowsill over the sink. Even though the plant was inches from the tap, the soil was so dry that he had to water it first before the candles would stand straight.

So, again the dry spoil of the potted ivy becomes a symbolic material for the dryness and the warmth which is dried up in this house, and her had to wet the soil for a while before you can make candle stick to it, or sink in it. Now again the lack of candles in the house is quite symbolic which is obviously in a very archetypal way.

If you look at the candle as an archetype or symbol of archetypal symbol, it will be symbol of light, a symbol of illumination. And that is so missing in this house, all the candles present in the house are birthday candles that is important symbol over here.

So, he had to water it first before the candle could stand straight. He pushed aside the things on the kitchen table, the piles of mails, unread library books, he remembered the first mails when they were so thrilled to be married, to live in together in the same house at last.

That they would just reach for each other foolishly, more eager to make love than to eat. So again this constant cutting back to the past of romance and love and fulfillment and desire, and excitement is used deliberately just to cut back into present and see that it could be the

opposite of that which is something they are experiencing at the moment which is a complete estrangement from each other.

He put down two embroidered place mats, a wedding gift from uncle in Lucknow, and set out the plates and wineglasses, they usually save for guest. He put the ivy in the middle, the white edged star shaped leaves, girded by 10 little candles. He switched on the digital clock radio and turned it into a Jazz station.

So it becomes, if you look at it ordinarily it becomes a symbol of romance, a symbol of romantic dinner with candle light and jazz radio and a little plant beside on the windowsill. And of course the food on the table, becomes wineglasses which are usually saved for guests, so again this is very symbolic, they are having wineglasses on the table which are meant for guests, so it is like two guest cooking a dinner together in the house, so that becomes a very hotel like existence again, right?

So he switches on the digital, he switched on the digital studio, clock radio and turned it into Jazz station. What is all this, Shobha said when she came downstairs, her hair was wrapped in a thick white towel. She undid the towel and draped it over a chair, allowing her hair, damp and dark to fall across the back as she walked absently towards the stove, she took out few tangles through her fingers.

She wore a clean pair of sweatpants, a T-shirt and an old flannel robe. Her stomach was flat again, her waist narrow before the flair of hips, the belt of robe tied a floppy knot. So again these are very small details obviously a suggestive of her post pregnancy situatedness. Her stomach was flat again, the waist narrow before the flair of her hips, the belt of the robe tied a floppy knot.

So again very-very careful details and also what she is wearing, a clean pair of sweatpants, a T-shirt and an old flannel robe when she comes back from the bath and she is seemly surprised by looking at this little setup, Shukumar had done.

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THE REASON FOR HIS CELEBRATION, AS IF HE HAD ONLY SURVIVED A BOMB BOMB BOMB. SHE NEVER THOUGHT TO TALK ABOUT SHOBHA, ONCE, WHEN HE MENTIONED THE BABY'S DEATH, SHE LOOKED UP FROM HER KNITTING, AND SAID, "BUT YOU WEREN'T EVEN THERE."

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It was nearly eight. Shukumar put the rice on the table and the lentils from the night before into the microwave oven, punching the numbers on the timer.

"You made *rogan josh*," Shoba observed, looking through the glass lid at the bright paprika stew.



It was nearly 8, Shukumar put the rice on the table and the lentils from the night before into the microwave oven, punching the numbers on the timer. "You made rogan josh," Shoba observed looking through the glass lid and the bright paprika stew. So it was about to turn 8, and Shukumar is warming up the food because light would go out at 8. And then Shoba observed that Shukumar had made rogan josh, sort of a preparation of lamb curry looking through the glass lid and the bright paprika stew.

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Shukumar took out a piece of lamb pinching it quickly between his fingers so as not to scald himself. He prodded a larger piece with serving spoon to make sure that meat slip easily from the bone. "It is ready," he announced. The Microwave just beeped when the lights went out and the music disappeared. So the microwave went out because the power went out, the music disappeared because the power went out again, and Shobha said, "Perfect timing."

So, you know 'perfect timing' obviously means that everything is prepared now and now they can eat and it becomes very convenient for them in terms of having a meal. "All I can find where birthday candles." He lit up the ivy, keeping the rest of the candles and a book of matches by his plate. "It does not matter," she said, running the finger along the stem of her wine glass. "It looks lovely."

So, you know, it becomes, it begins to become very symbolic, it begins to become happy again, it begins to sort of arrive in certain kind of happiness and she is holding a wine glass, she seems to be relaxing little bit, and then you know they have candles, and he says to her that, "All he could find were birthday candles," and she tells him, "It looks lovely."

So, it all becomes, it seems too nice, it seems to become nice and happy in a way which was missing for a long period of time in this house. In the dimness he knew how she sat, a bit forward in her chair, ankles crossed against the lowest rung, left elbow on the table. During his search for the candles, Shukumar had found a bottle of wine in a crate he thought was empty.

He clamped the bottle between his knees while he turned in the corkscrew. He worried about spilling so he picked up the glasses and held them close to his laps while her filled them. They serve themselves, stirring the rice with their forks, squinting as they extracted bay leaves and cloves from the stew. Every few minutes Shukumar lit few more birthday candles and drove them into the soil on the pot.

So it becomes a meal of happiness, it looks like it has a material of happiness around it, this wine, this wineglasses and well-made lamb curry and it has birthday candles along with it. And again this whole idea of two adults having, having a meal out of birthday candles becomes a very symbolic kind of image if you think about it deeply.

Because these birthday candles were used at Shukumar's last birthday, right? And everything stopped after that. It was interrupted after that, the happiness was interrupted after that, with

the disappearance of the child, or the non-arrival of the child. And now that same box of birthday candles were used to light up this dinner. And that becomes in a way a continuation, a quasi-continuation if you will, of the happiness which was there at that point of time.

So, it becomes, the fact that he is using a material from that happy past, to continue into the present becomes a bit of symbolic narrative in a way. Again the spatiotemporal setting is very important. It becomes a temporal continuation of that past in a way, and of course, the space is important because it is the same house, but then it is a dark house now.

It is not really a birthday party where you can put out the light at will and bring it back again, it is a house where lights have gone out for one hour and it will go out every day for next five days, for one hour and the birthday candles becomes a very important, symbolic presence in this kind of a setting.

“It is like India.” Shobha said watching them tend his makeshift candelabra. “Sometimes the current disappears for hours at a stretch, I once had to attend an entire rice ceremony in the dark. The baby just cried and cried, it must have been so hot. So, you know they are talking about domestic things, they are talking about little things.

Shobha talks about what it is like in India and she narrates an experience where power went out for stretch of time, for hours and hours and there was a rice ceremony where baby is given rice for the first time, which is symbolically giving the baby solid food for the first time.

And she says that, “power is off and it is presumably summer it was very hot and then the baby just cried and cried.” So you know they are talking about a baby in rice ceremony and that becomes again a very symbolic kind of signifier and the baby that they never had, it keeps coming back in this narrative, it keeps coming back in the experience.

And we are told immediately after that their baby, never cried, Shukumar considered. So you know the complete contrast is done over here with the mention of their baby who never cried. And this reference to a baby who crying in the rice ceremony is interesting because as I mentioned that the baby keeps arriving in the narrative, the baby keeps arriving at the conversation despite the non-arrival, it keeps arriving as a spectral presence, and we are told immediately that their baby never cried.

Shukumar considered, their baby would never have a rice ceremony even though Shobha had already made a guest list. Decided in which of the three brothers she was going to ask to feed the child, his first taste of solid food at six months, if it was a boy, seven if it was a girl.

So, all these little rituals, these very Bengali rituals of rice ceremony where the uncle, the maternal uncle, is the one who comes and feeds the baby for the first time, the first solid food, six months if it is a boy and seven months if it is a girl that is the ritual temporarily speaking, and we are told that Shobha had already made a guest list, Shobha had already decided who among her three brothers she would ask to feed the baby for the first time.

So, all these little decisions had been done, all these little lists have been made and this is important because you know that tells you something about the character of the person, the meticulous attention to details, the care about little things that she has as a person. And then we cut back into the present. "Are you hot," he asked her. He pushed the blazing ivy pot to the other end of the table, closer to the piles of the books and mails making even more difficult for them to see each other.

He was suddenly irritated that he couldn't go upstairs and sit in front of the computer. So again notice the way in which they are habituated, to sort of in avoiding each other, so he tells her are you hot, and then pushes the candle away just so they can be more invisible to each other and then he finds himself getting irritated by the fact that he can't actually go and escape into his study and then not talk to her because that has become a ritual, that has become a habit in him over the period of time that they have been avoiding each other.

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themselves, stirring the rice with their forks, squinting as they extracted bay leaves and cloves from the stew. Every few minutes Shukumar lit a few more birthday candles and drove them into the soil of the pot.

"It's like India," Shoba said, watching him tend his makeshift candelabra. "Sometimes the current disappears for hours at a stretch. I once had to attend an entire rice ceremony in the dark. The baby just cried and cried. It must have been so hot."

Their baby had never cried, Shukumar considered. Their baby would never have a rice ceremony, even though Shoba had already made the guest list, and decided on which of her three brothers she was going to ask to feed the child its first taste of solid food, at six months if it was a boy, seven if it was a girl.

"Are you hot?" he asked her. He pushed the blazing ivy pot to the other end of the table, closer to the piles of books and mail, making it even more difficult for them to see each other. He was suddenly irritated that he couldn't go upstairs and sit in front of the computer.

"No. It's delicious," she said, tapping her plate with her fork. "It really is."

He refilled the wine in her glass. She thanked him.

They weren't like this before. Now he had to struggle to say something that interested her, something that made her look up from her plate, or from her proofreading files. Eventually he gave up trying to amuse her. He learned not to mind the silences.

"I remember during power failures at my grandmother's house, we all had to say something," Shoba continued. He could barely see her face, but from her tone he knew her eyes were narrowed, as if trying to focus on a distant object. It was a habit of hers.



"No. It is delicious," she said, tapping her plate with the fork. "It really is." He refilled the wine in her glass. She thanked him. They weren't like this before. Now again this has become obviously very formal and stiff where the husband is asking, if the food is too hot, the wife is saying this is delicious and she thanks him, etc.

And that becomes a very formal exchange of conversation which is not something which you find in truly intimate settings. Where you don't thank people so much, and this becomes more of a very polite form of stiff conversation, where they are trying to talk to each other, and this attempt to talk to each other becomes very visible, very palpably present in the story.

And we are told they weren't like this before, now he had to struggle to say something that interested her, something that made her look up from the plate, or from the proofreading files. Eventually he gave up try to amuse her, he learned not to mind the silences.

So it becomes increasingly large stretches of silence, really and of course those silences become habit, those silences become regular ritual in the house, and then he gives up trying to get over the silences, trying to move away from the silences, trying to make conversation across the silences, silences consume the conversation in a way which becomes the rituals in the house. And then of course they talk about other things over here.

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"I remember during power failures at my grandmother's house, we all had to say something," Shoba continued. He could barely see her face, but from her tone he knew her eyes were narrowed, as if trying to focus on a distant object. It was a habit of hers.

"Like what?"

"I don't know. A little poem. A joke. A fact about the world. For some reason my relatives always want



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So the distinct object over here becomes a piece of memory, that she is trying to focus on, some point in the past, and she says over here that you know, during the power cuts at her grandmother's house presumably in Calcutta, they would have to play a game where they would have to say something.

Little poem or joke, could be told to bring a narrative, to produce, to generate a narrative which is shared by all these fellow sufferers of power cut. And that is something again well one can relate to as people growing up in 90s Calcutta, or even before that in Calcutta where we had entire days of power cut, where people invented little games and rituals to amuse themselves with when there is no power at all.



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"Like what?"

"I don't know. A little poem. A joke. A fact about the world. For some reason my relatives always wanted me to tell them the names of my friends in America. I don't know why the information was so interesting to them. The last time I saw my aunt she asked after four girls I went to elementary school with in Tucson. I barely remember them now."



And then Shukumar asked her, "Like what?" "I don't know. A little poem or joke, a fact about the world for some reason my relatives who always wanted me to tell them the names of my friends in America. I don't know why the information was so interesting to them. The last time I saw my aunt, she asked after four girls I went to elementary school within Tucson. I barely remember them now."

So, interestingly she says that when I was kid and every time I went back to Calcutta, they wanted to know the names of my American friends. And she said that last time when I was there obviously as an adult, many-many years later my aunt was asking after this four girls that she went to elementary school. So they remember them but she doesn't, so she said, "I barely remember them." But to them it becomes a big object, it becomes a big matter of memory in a way.

And that becomes an important point over here because what is being said over here, is that to Indian people, to Indian relatives situated in Calcutta, America becomes an object of fascinating foreignness. And that fascinating foreignness manifests itself in terms of names of American children, in terms of names of places, people, food and that is so etched in her memory in a way that she remembers it.

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Shukumar hadn't spent as much time in India as Shoba had. His parents, who settled in New Hampshire, used to go back without him. The first time he'd gone as an infant he'd nearly died of amoebic dysentery. His father, a nervous type, was afraid to take him again, in case something were to happen, and left him with his aunt and uncle in Concord. As a teenager he preferred sailing camp or scooping ice cream during the summers to going to Calcutta. It wasn't until after his father died, in his last year of college, that the country began to interest him, and he studied its history from course books as if it were any other subject. He wished now that he had his own childhood story of India.

"Let's do that," she said suddenly.

"Do what?"

"Say something to each other in the dark."

"Like what? I don't know any jokes."

"No, no jokes." She thought for a minute. "How about telling each other something we've never told before."

"I used to play this game in high school," Shukumar recalled. "When I got drunk."

"You're thinking of truth or dare. This is different. Okay, I'll start." She took a sip of wine. "The first time I was alone in your apartment, I looked in your address book to see if you'd written me in. I think we'd know each other two weeks."

"Whom were you?"



Because to her growing up in America, was very-very ordinary thing, but that ordinariness becomes extraordinary for people in India, in Calcutta. And over here we are told Shukumar hadn't spent as much time in India as Shobha had. His parents were settled in New Hampshire, he used to go back without him. The first time he had gone as an infant, he had nearly died of Amebic Dysentery.

So he had a very terrible experience of dysentery as a child. His father a nervous type, was afraid to take him again. In case something were to happen, and left him with his aunt and uncle in Concord. As a teenager he preferred sailing camp, scooping ice cream in summers to go into Calcutta, it wasn't until after his father died in his last year of college that a country began to interest him.

And he studied his history from course books as if it were any other subject. He wished now that he had his own childhood story of India. So this is interesting because Shukumar's experience of India is very textual in quality, we are told he has gathered information of India from textbook, had not experientially but textually. And whereas Shobha had more experiential episodes from India where she has actually gone and visited and have stories to tell. And we are told that Shukumar wishes that he had his own story, own childhood stories of India.

So, what we see over here is, and I will conclude the lecture at this point, what we see over here is two people who are attempting, trying very hard to make a conversation, to strike a

conversation, trying to product a ludic narrative. And what I mean my ludic narrative, it means a playful narrative, ludic is play, playful.

So they are trying to play a game to cover the darkness, to cover the distance between them, and that darkness, that distance obviously becomes a very prevailing, progressive presence in them. And they are trying to make a peripheral conversation through a game, to some kind of a ludic activity and that is something which we find, and they are drawing on similar experiences in Calcutta where people had to live for stretches of time without any power at all, where they invent games and rituals where they would interact with each other and obviously that was darkness in a way, darkness of power cut.

Now darkness over here is not so much, because of the power cut, as the darkness because of the distance between them. And they are trying to cover the distance, they are trying to get rid of the distance, they are trying to get around the distance by using a playful ludic activity, that is something which we see as the story progresses.

I will stop at this point today and I will conclude, hopefully continue and conclude this story in next few lectures to come. Thank you for your attention.