

**Feminist Writings**  
**Professor Avishek Parui**  
**Department of Humanities and Social Studies**  
**Indian Institute of Technology Madras**  
**A Temporary Matter - Part 1**

So, hello and welcome to this NPTEL course entitled Feminist Writings. We will begin with the new text today which will be Jhumpa Lahiri short story A Temporary Matter. Now, as we know that we have done a series of text which cover theoretical grounds about feminism, about gender studies and also we have literary text which self-explicate and instantiate the theoretical readings. Now one of the good things about literary text is that fiction provides you a very interesting refractive medium of reality. So it is a good refraction of reality.

It is not just a reflection, it is a refraction of reality in a sense that you know what the refraction (0:50) when light travels from one medium to another medium there is a certain change in angle. There is certain change in character of light. So what happens is in fiction is likewise there is certain degree of stylization of reality that is why the word refraction is probably a better word than reflection. Now when you come to a writer like Jhumpa Lahiri we find that she is a master storyteller.

She is someone who is very meticulous in her descriptions of lived experiences, embodied experience, about the density of communication or the lack of density of communication. And one of the key things, one of the key characteristics in her work is the idea of intimacy. So she is really one of the key artist in terms of storytelling medium of intimacy, in terms of describing intimacy, in terms of you know explicating intimacy etc. And that is something that you know there is a tradition of literary fiction which you know has that sort of thing. So you can go back to Maupassant, Chekhov

And she very much belongs to that tradition of short story writing, the very Maupassant, Chekhovian kind of short story writing which is about domestic intimate matter. But that intimate matters can actually become a macro reality. It can sort of throw light on a bigger structure, on a wider structure of reality which is more political which can be more discursive in quality. And one of the things we have been very keen on emphasizing throughout this course is the idea of the entanglement if you will, between corporeal reality and discursivity right? They are not really water tight compartments, they are not very set apart from each other so corporeal experience is almost always discursive in quality, is almost political in quality, it

has a political angle, it has political situatedness to it which makes it obviously more corporeal in quality.

So there are so complement each other one another, they are two qualities and if you look at Lahiri's writing you find that this is obviously from the short story collection interpret a (( )) (2:46) which one, the Pulitzer award as I am sure all of you know but you know one of the key things you find across her writing so whether it is short fiction or longer work that she has produced like Name Sake you know you find that there is a lot of human interaction, human intimacy, human conversation which described in great details. And that is another thing that we find running throughout her work. There are very keen attentions to details, very meticulous attention paid to details.

Very very small things, very ordinary things they are looked at in such intensity that it becomes extraordinary in quality. That is something which we find, we found for instance in this course and even Dunya Mikhail's poetry. The Iraqi Nights for instance which really in a way, it poetises ordinariness. It tries to lay claim to ordinariness, it tries to itself tell you the ordinariness not something which you take of granted. Ordinariness is something which can actually be life giving, which can actually be very very meaningful. It is what we do everyday ordinariness, it is what we consume every day, it is what we navigate to it every day.

Now, this particular story A Temporary Matter we find that a lot of attention is paid to seeming banal details, seemingly superficial details, seemingly meaningless details, things which seemingly do not really matter much. But if you pay closer attention to it you will find that those are the details, those are the banal things which actually reflect, which throw light on darker, deeper aspects of human reality of human, of human embodiedness of human you know conversations. And obviously there is a constant connection going on between the intimate micro small ordinary things and the bigger macro more structural more discursive things. So that interaction is something which Lahiri navigates with great balance with great you know, in a very delicate manner and that's something which makes her such compelling story teller.

So, this is a story about a couple about an Indian couple living in America. The man in the story is a person called Sukumar who is PHD scholar in an American University and the woman Shobha you know she works in a particular advertisement agency and this is a story about what happens to them and it is a story about the intimacy that they share, the lack of

intimacy, the crises of conversation, the crises of communication and of course there is a deeper, darker spectral presence in the story. I am not going to give it away right now. But you know as we read the story we will find that there is this deeper, darker presence in this story which is sort of brooding throughout the narrative, which is very seldom mentioned which comes much later.

But we will find it by the time we reach the end of the story or even the middle of the story we find it is actually about that all the time. And all this superficial details in the foreground are all very strategically described. So the details about kitchen, details about the drawing room, about the you know the dresses people wear, they all mean something. And they are all connecting to a deeper, darker so kernel which is at the middle of the story, which is a kernel of lost, a kernel of absence, a self spectral presence which is there throughout. Now also if you look at the title, A Temporary Matter, if you read it randomly if you just come across come by this phrase A Temporary Matter it sort of more often I will think of it in terms of something banal, something superficial, something not quite so meaningful.

It is a temporary matter will come and go, there is a degree of temporality about it. But then as we read the story again and again, as we move into the narrative you will find that this actually becomes again darker, denser and deeper. And we find that temporary matter is actually about something which is not quite so temporary. It is actually permanent, it is actually about perpetuity and the permanence could be a permanence of loss, permanence of absence, permanence of crises, etc. So there is that, you know to sum up there is very interesting dialogic relationship between the superficial and the deep between the seemingly ordinary and extra ordinary between the banal and the intense and between the flipped and between the profound in Lahiri's Fiction.

And that connection is consistently maintained in her writing, in her narratives which makes it actually such intense, beautiful, delicate piece of work. And like I said she is very much part of the tradition of Chekovian you know Prostien tradition of dense description and dense description obviously mean you pay a lot of attention to the details etc. the architecture of the story, the architectonic of the story for instance. It is talking about the electricity, talk about the blanket, talk about the furniture, you talk about furniture, you talk about the utensils, you talk about the food and all these things they all keep connecting to some deeper, darker, denser truth which is always there.

Suspended in some spectral landscape in the story. Okay so right with that we dive into the story and we ourselves look at what the story contains in terms of content and descriptions.

(Refer Slide Time: 7:54)

### *A Temporary Matter*

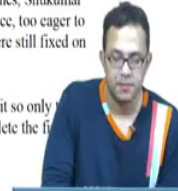
Jhumpa Lahiri

The notice informed them that it was a temporary matter: for five days their electricity would be cut off for one hour, beginning at eight P.M. A line had gone down in the last snowstorm, and the repairmen were going to take advantage of the milder evenings to set it right. The work would affect only the houses on the quiet tree-lined street, within walking distance of a row of brick-faced stores and a trolley stop, where Shoba and Shukumar had lived for three years.

"It's good of them to warn us," Shoba conceded after reading the notice aloud, more for her own benefit than Shukumar's. She let the strap of her leather satchel, plump with files, slip from her shoulders, and left it in the hallway as she walked into the kitchen. She wore a navy blue poplin raincoat over gray sweatpants and white sneakers, looking, at thirty-three, like the type of woman she'd once claimed she would never resemble.

She'd come from the gym. Her cranberry lipstick was visible only on the outer reaches of her mouth, and her eyeliner had left charcoal patches beneath her lower lashes. She used to look this way sometimes, Shukumar thought, on mornings after a party or a night at a bar, when she'd been too lazy to wash her face, too eager to collapse into his arms. She dropped a sheaf of mail on the table without a glance. Her eyes were still fixed on the notice in her other hand. "But they should do this sort of thing during the day."

"When I'm here, you mean," Shukumar said. He put a glass lid on a pot of lamb, adjusting it so only the slightest bit of steam could escape. Since January he'd been working at home, trying to complete the final chapters of his dissertation on agrarian revolts in India. "When do the repairs start?"



Okay, so this is *The Temporary Matter* by Jhumpa Lahiri. The notice informed them that it was a temporary matter: for five days their electricity would be cut off for one hour, beginning at eight P.M. A line had gone down in the last snowstorm, and the repairmen were going to take advantage of the milder evenings to set it right. The work would affect only the houses on the quiet tree-lined street, within walking distance of a row of brick-faced stores and a trolley stop, where Shoba and Shukumar had lived for three years.

So if you look at the opening paragraph you will find that began a very keen attention to details. It talks about the brick faced stores, the tree lined street, all these things are very carefully and sort of almost with a lot of (())(8:36) detailed out for us, everything is very carefully curated and described and delineated and mapped in front of us. So we have a landscape immediately in our mind. And then we are told that this is a temporary matter and we are told what is the temporary matter and the temporary matter is something very very external apparently at this point of time very material. So there will be some repair work going on in the electricity lines. So for 5 days the electricity of Shobha and Shukumar who live in this neighbourhood there will be cut-off for one hour beginning at 8 p.m. so from 8 p.m. to 9 p.m. every day for next 5 days there will be electricity a power-cut because of some repair work going on.

So the notice had come that this is a temporary matter and there is an apology for the inconvenience which this might cause. The repairmen will work on this electricity line which was affected by last snow storm because the evenings are milder, they will take care of it during night and of course this work will only affect the houses where Shobha and Shukumar live the quiet tree lined street with a walking distance of row of brick phase stores and a trolley stop. You know that is the neighbourhood described for us where Shobha and Shukumar had lived for 3 years. So what you find is there is a lot of spatio temporal detail which is delineated for all of us.

Spaces are mapped off very well, spaces are described very well and also time because we are told that for instance, first instance of time the first reference of time is 5 days. And we are told that electricity will not come for one hour another instance of little spot of time for one hour from 8 p.m. to 9 p.m. to the next 5 day. And this is the neighbourhood where Shilpa Shobha and Shukumar lived for 3 years. So all these spatio temporal dense details are mapped on in front of us in a great descriptive, rigor descriptive, happiness there is the degree of happiness in the description, it is very detailed, carefully done, its all very mapped on in front of us. So you can visualize it as readers.

“It’s good of them to warn us,” Shoba conceded after reading the notice aloud, more for her own benefit than Shukumar’s. So you know again this is the first instance in the story where you find a certain kind of conversation going on where Shobha read out the notice, “It's good of them to warn us.” But she is not actually telling that to her husband Shukumar, we assume that he is her husband Shukumar, or a partner, or a boyfriend, we don't quite know. So Shobha reads out the notice but then we are also told immediately that this is more for her own benefit than Shukumar. So you know immediately we begin to realize that it might be that some kind of a description about the conversations, the communications of these two people which is been hinted at this point of time.

Because when you are reading the notice you are not quiet bothered so much whether that is going to been heard by the other person across the table but you are doing it for your own benefit. You are doing it because you want to so read out and register it and process it in your mind. She let the strap of her leather satchel, plump with files, slip from her shoulders, and left it in the hallway as she walked into the kitchen. She wore a navy blue poplin raincoat over gray sweatpants and white sneakers, looking, at thirty-three, like the type of woman she had once claimed she would never resemble.

So we have given a description of her dress, very careful sartorial details and then we have also been given a description of a guide in the house so she takes out the leather satchel which is full of files, slips from her shoulders, and leaves it on the hallways and walks into the kitchen. And it was a raincoat over gray sweatpants and we are also told that she is thirty-three years old and she is looking like a type of woman that she once claimed she would never resemble. So again we are told of a certain thing and these are seemingly superficial descriptions about dress, about a certain kind of walk, about certain kind of appearance but also notice the way it connects to something probably deeper, you know because we are been told right away she once claimed that she will never look like this kind of woman but then she ends up looking exactly like that at the age of thirty-three.

She had come from the gym. Her cranberry lipstick was visible only on the outer reaches of her mouth, and her eyeliner had left charcoal patches beneath her lower lashes. She used to look this way sometimes, Shukumar thought, on mornings after a party or a night at a bar, when she'd been too lazy to wash her face, too eager to collapse into his arms. She dropped a sheaf of mail on the table without a glance. Her eyes were still fixed on the notice in her other hand. "But they should do this sort of thing during the day."

So again we have been given a very detailed description of her look. We are told that she has cranberry lipstick and her eyeliner has charcoal patches and then we go flash back in time and we are told that is how she used to look many years ago presumably when she used to go to a bar and party, in a bar or just to a party and come back and be too lazy to take of her makeup to take of... wash her face and then just collapse in his arms. So that kind of description of hers seems to suggest that there something very different in terms of how she looks now. So that seems to be like a fun filled past, that seems to be a part of happiness and romance and love compared to which the present perhaps is bit more dry, perhaps a bit more dark, we do not quite know, we do not know the details as yet but again we are given hints after hints and we as readers are supposed as competent readers we are supposed to has it a guess in terms of how this might have worked out.

And then interestingly she says she is still looking at the notice which came from the electricity board and she says, "They should do this all thing during the day." You know she says day is a time when people go out to work, when people go out to their offices so that is the better time to cut-off the power for one hour if they have to do it.

(Refer Slide Time: 14:20)

The notice informed them that it was a temporary matter: for five days their electricity would be cut off for one hour, beginning at eight P.M. A line had gone down in the last snowstorm, and the repairmen were going to take advantage of the milder evenings to set it right. The work would affect only the houses on the quiet tree-lined street, within walking distance of a row of brick-faced stores and a trolley stop, where Shoba and Shukumar had lived for three years.

"It's good of them to warn us," Shoba conceded after reading the notice aloud, more for her own benefit than Shukumar's. She let the strap of her leather satchel, plump with files, slip from her shoulders, and left it in the hallway as she walked into the kitchen. She wore a navy blue poplin raincoat over gray sweatpants and white sneakers, looking, at thirty-three, like the type of woman she'd once claimed she would never resemble.

She'd come from the gym. Her cranberry lipstick was visible only on the outer reaches of her mouth, and her eyeliner had left charcoal patches beneath her lower lashes. She used to look this way sometimes, Shukumar thought, on mornings after a party or a night at a bar, when she'd been too lazy to wash her face, too eager to collapse into his arms. She dropped a sheaf of mail on the table without a glance. Her eyes were still fixed on the notice in her other hand. "But they should do this sort of thing during the day."

"When I'm here, you mean," Shukumar said. He put a glass lid on a pot of lamb, adjusting it so only the slightest bit of steam could escape. Since January he'd been working at home, trying to complete the final chapters of his dissertation on agrarian revolts in India. "When do the repairs start?"



"When I'm here, you mean," Shukumar said. He put a glass lid on a pot of lamb, adjusting it so only the slightest bit of steam could escape. Since January he'd been working at home, trying to complete the final chapters of his dissertation on agrarian revolts in India. "When do the repairs start?"

So this is the information we get at this moment, we realise as we are told that Shukumar the man he lives and sits at home, stays at home, her works from home and he is presumably working on a PhD he is presumably working with dissertation on the subject of agrarian revolts in India right. And Shobha on the other hand she presumably works outside of home she goes to an office to work. So Shukumar works from home, working on a page team where Shobha is someone who is outside working on something, maybe a company we do not know the details yet. And we are also told that Shukumar is the one the person cooking for them. So he is cooking lamb, a pot of lamb and then he is doing it as delicately as possible in terms of adjusting the steam etc. And then the question starts when do the repair start. So when will you know the power cut start?

(Refer Slide Time: 15:25)

“It says March nineteenth. Is today the nineteenth?” Shoba walked over to the framed corkboard that hung on the wall by the fridge, bare except for a calendar of William Morris wallpaper patterns. She looked at it as if for the first time, studying the wallpaper pattern carefully on the top half before allowing her eyes to fall to the numbered grid on the bottom. A friend had sent the calendar in the mail as a Christmas gift, even though Shoba and Shukumar hadn’t celebrated Christmas that year.

“Today then,” Shoba announced. “You have a dentist appointment next Friday, by the way.”

He ran his tongue over the tops of his teeth; he’d forgotten to brush them that morning. It wasn’t the first time. He hadn’t left the house at all that day, or the day before. The more Shoba stayed out, the more she began putting in extra hours at work and taking on additional projects, the more he wanted to stay in, not even leaving to get the mail, or to buy fruit or wine at the stores by the trolley stop.

Six months ago, in September, Shukumar was at an academic conference in Baltimore when Shoba went into labor, three weeks before her due date. He hadn’t wanted to go to the conference, but she had insisted; it was important to make contacts, and he would be entering the job market next year. She told him that she had his number at the hotel, and a copy of his schedule and flight numbers, and she had arranged with her friend Gillian for a ride to the hospital in the event of an emergency. When the cab pulled away that morning for the airport, Shoba stood waving good-bye in her robe, with one arm resting on the mound of her belly as if it were a perfectly natural part of her body.

Each time he thought of that moment, the last moment he saw Shoba pregnant, it was the cab he remembered most, a station wagon, painted red with blue lettering. It was cavernous compared to their own car. Although Shukumar was six feet tall, with hands too big ever to rest comfortably in the pockets of his jeans, he felt dwarfed in the back seat. As the cab sped down Beacon Street, he imagined a day when he and Shoba



“It says March nineteenth. Is today the nineteenth?” Shoba walked over to the framed corkboard that hung on the wall by the fridge, bare except for a calendar of William Morris wallpaper patterns. So the bare refrigerator is again symbolic of something you know may be there is a degree of bareness or bare quality of the lives that we do not quite know, it just has one little calendar containing William Morris wallpaper pattern. She looked at it as if for the first time, studying the wallpaper pattern carefully on the top half before allowing her eyes to fall to the numbered grid on the bottom. A friend had sent the calendar in the mail as a Christmas gift, even though Shoba and Shukumar hadn’t celebrated Christmas that year.

Again we are given a bit of half information, we are told that they have not celebrated Christmas that year we don't quite know why. Again we get hint after hint that is some kind of sadness, some kind of absence, some kind of loss which may have occurred because we get flashbacks of times which are happy and euphoric and you know fun filled etc. compare and contrast into that we have time, now which is so seemingly bare and minimalist and there is a degree of terseness in terms of the conversation etc. and we are told that you know that particular year they have not celebrated Christmas so we do not why, so something may have happened for them not to celebrate Christmas.

“Today then,” Shoba announced. “You have a dentist appointment next Friday, by the way.” So you know today happens to be March 19 so the power cuts will start from today and then she tells him that, “You have a dentist appointment next Friday by the way.”



(Refer Slide Time: 16:59)

"It says March nineteenth. Is today the nineteenth?" Shoba walked over to the framed corkboard that hung on the wall by the fridge, bare except for a calendar of William Morris wallpaper patterns. She looked at it as if for the first time, studying the wallpaper pattern carefully on the top half before allowing her eyes to fall to the numbered grid on the bottom. A friend had sent the calendar in the mail as a Christmas gift, even though Shoba and Shukumar hadn't celebrated Christmas that year.

"Today then," Shoba announced. "You have a dentist appointment next Friday, by the way."

He ran his tongue over the tops of his teeth; he'd forgotten to brush them that morning. It wasn't the first time. He hadn't left the house at all that day, or the day before. The more Shoba stayed out, the more she began putting in extra hours at work and taking on additional projects, the more he wanted to stay in, not even leaving to get the mail, or to buy fruit or wine at the stores by the trolley stop.

Six months ago, in September, Shukumar was at an academic conference in Baltimore when Shoba went into labor, three weeks before her due date. He hadn't wanted to go to the conference, but she had insisted; it was important to make contacts, and he would be entering the job market next year. She told him that she had his number at the hotel, and a copy of his schedule and flight numbers, and she had arranged with her friend Gillian for a ride to the hospital in the event of an emergency. When the cab pulled away that morning for the airport, Shoba stood waving good-bye in her robe, with one arm resting on the mound of her belly as if it were a perfectly natural part of her body.

Each time he thought of that moment, the last moment he saw Shoba pregnant, it was the cab he remembered most, a station wagon, painted red with blue lettering. It was cavernous compared to their own car. Although Shukumar was six feet tall, with hands too big ever to rest comfortably in the pockets of his jeans, he had been dwarfed in the back seat. As the cab sped down Beacon Street, he imagined a day when he and Shoba would



He ran his tongue over the tops of his teeth; he'd forgotten to brush them that morning. It wasn't the first time. He hadn't left the house at all that day, or the day before. The more Shoba stayed out, the more she began putting in extra hours at work and taking on additional projects, the more he wanted to stay in, not even leaving to get the mail, or to buy fruit or wine at the stores by the trolley stop.

So, we are told, we are given two very different descriptions of their lifestyles and work. We are told that Shobha is someone who is constantly looking for work outside taking on additional projects one project after the another project, whereas Shukumar is getting more and more withdrawn. He stays in the house almost all day, does not brush his teeth sometimes you know, does not do anything outside that what he is supposed to do in terms of household chores and does not even leave together mails sometimes or to buy fruit or wine at the stores, alright so he does not step out to get fruits and wine or to get mail.

A very different kind of lives, Shobha has always wanted to stay out, Shukumar always wanted to stay in and that kind of centrifugal, centipedal inclination seem to suggest that may be they are not quiet connected to each other in a way that they are probably were at some point of time because we have been given description that at one point of time Shobha and Shukumar would party all night and Shobha would come back and collapse in his arms.

Not even bothering to take of hers eyeliners or the makeup that she had on, so that must have been a much happier time, that must have been more intimate, they must have been more

romantic compared to what they have now which is so seemingly bare in quality. And now we are given, now we are told, now we get sort of the central part of the story, the central part of the information from which everything else emerges, from which everything else emanates in terms of the quality of the life they have.

So what happened, something must have happened to make this sort of dramatic difference between the past and the present, this massive transition that experienced painfully perhaps, but it what they used to have, what they used to share at one point of time and what they have now. So what took place and this what took place, so this is an event in the story which cause the transition, which causes massive difference.

Six months ago, in September, Shukumar was at an academic conference in Baltimore when Shoba went into labour. So, she was pregnant, she went into labour, and Shukumar had gone to an academic conference in Baltimore. Three weeks before her due date. So, she was due to delivery on a particular day but three weeks before the date she went into labour and she had to be hospitalized and Shukumar had to go to conference at that point of time. He hadn't wanted to go to the conference, but she had insisted; it was important to make contacts, and he would be entering the job market next year.

She told him that she had his number at the hotel, and a copy of his schedule and flight numbers, and she had arranged with her friend Gillian for a ride to the hospital in the event of an emergency. When the cab pulled away that morning for the airport, Shoba stood waving good-bye in her robe, with one arm resting on the mound of her belly as if it were a perfectly natural part of her body.

So we are told, we are given a description of her pregnancy and we found that she was pregnant and we found that she was about to deliver a baby. And she went into labour you know three weeks before her due date and that also happened at the time when Shukumar had to go to a conference in Baltimore. He was reluctant to go we are told but then we also told that she insisted him, you know he went because it was important for him to make contacts, to make a peer network because he would be entering the job market soon.

And then she told him that in case of emergency she has her friend who can drive her to the hospital and she has all the contacts of him to reach him in the hotel and you know in case something goes wrong. And then we are told that the last image that Shukumar had of the

pregnant Shobha was her standing and waving good bye in her robe with one arm resting on her mound of her belly as it were a perfectly natural part of her body.

So the belly obviously of a pregnant woman but it looks completely natural on her body and that so seems to suggest that she finds the entire experience of pregnancy, she found the entire experience of pregnancy to be perfectly organic and natural and happy. Just fitted in her perfectly in a very organic natural way that was the image that he had of her when he drove off to the airport in a taxi. Each time he thought of that moment, the last time he saw Shobha pregnant it was the cab. So you know that was the last image that stayed in his mind, that was the last image of Shobha that Shukumar had in all times and that was the image of him, her standing and waving good bye when she was pregnant.

So, each time he thought of that moment, the last moment he saw Shoba pregnant, it was the cab he remembered most, a station wagon, painted red with blue lettering. So that vehicle becomes very important as a symbolic presence, as a symbolic space as the last time Shukumar saw Shobha pregnant, the last moment the, last image of her being pregnant and he remembers the cab that he was in. It was cavernous compared to their own car. It was like a cavern, almost like a cave like quality, it was like big and huge. Although, Shukumar was six feet tall, with hands too big ever to rest comfortably in the pockets of his jeans, he felt dwarfed in the back seat.

So we have been talking about a lot about the relationship in space and embodiment especially when it comes to gender and we have seen how that plays out in different situations for instance we remember Sylvia Plath's poems Tulips which we covered during this course, you know the entire quality of space affects the way you embody yourself, affects the way you acknowledge your embodiment, affects the way you have awareness of your body.

And likewise we have over here Shukumar over here in this massive station wagon he feels dwarfed, he feels small despite been 6 feets tall, despite having huge hands, he feels bit tiny down in a way. As the cab sped down Beacon Street, he imagined the day when he and Shoba might need to buy a station wagon of their own, to cart their children back and forth from music lessons and dentist appointments.

(Refer Slide Time: 24:10)

labor, three weeks before her due date. He hadn't wanted to go to the conference, but she had insisted; it was important to make contacts, and he would be entering the job market next year. She told him that she had his number at the hotel, and a copy of his schedule and flight numbers, and she had arranged with her friend Gillian for a ride to the hospital in the event of an emergency. When the cab pulled away that morning for the airport, Shoba stood waving good-bye in her robe, with one arm resting on the mound of her belly as if it were a perfectly natural part of her body.

Each time he thought of that moment, the last moment he saw Shoba pregnant, it was the cab he remembered most, a station wagon, painted red with blue lettering. It was cavernous compared to their own car. Although Shukumar was six feet tall, with hands too big ever to rest comfortably in the pockets of his jeans, he felt dwarfed in the back seat. As the cab sped down Beacon Street, he imagined a day when he and Shoba might need to buy a station wagon of their own, to cart their children back and forth from music lessons and dentist appointments. He imagined himself gripping the wheel, as Shoba turned around to hand the children juice boxes. Once, these images of parenthood had troubled Shukumar, adding to his anxiety that he was still a student at thirty-five. But that early autumn morning, the trees still heavy with bronze leaves, he welcomed the image for the first time.

A member of the staff had found him somehow among the identical convention rooms and handed him a stiff square of stationery. It was only a telephone number, but Shukumar knew it was the hospital. When he called to Boston it was over. The baby had been born dead. Shoba was lying on a bed, asleep, in a private room so small there was barely enough space to stand beside her, in a wing of the hospital they hadn't been to on a tour for expectant parents. Her placenta had weakened and she'd had a cesarean, though not quickly enough. The doctor explained that these things happen. He smiled in the kindest way it was possible to smile. Shoba would be back on her feet in a few weeks. There was nothing she would not be able to do in the future.



So you know this is an image of a perfectly domestic couple, a perfectly happy couple with children, with you know buying a station wagon and taking them to different appointments, appointments with doctors, appointments with music lessons, appointments with different things that children do etc. and you know that again becomes an image of felicity, an image of happiness, an image of you know perfect familial felicity in Shukumars mind.

And what that seems to suggest obviously is that was something, there was a possibility that they had and that possibility is probably lost, that possibility is probably frustrated because of certain things so you know he imagined himself having to buy a station wagon, taking the children to different appointments etc. He imagined himself gripping the wheel, as Shoba turned around to hand the children juice boxes.

Once, these images of parenthood had troubled Shukumar, adding to his anxiety that he was still a student at thirty-five. But that early autumn morning, the trees still heavy with bronze leaves, he welcomed the image for the first time. So he had this image of possibility of parenthood in his mind and he thought we will be a station wagon and we will take the children out for different appointments to picnics, dentist's appointments, to music lessons and Shobha would be on the front seat turn back and give the juice boxes to the children's.

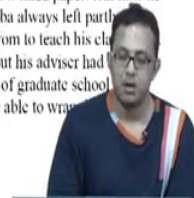
So that becomes an image of perfect happiness, perfect familial happiness, a perfect parental happiness etc. And that was the image he had in mind while he was sitting in the station

wagon, heading to the airport, heading to the conference away from his pregnant wife who was about to go into labour.

(Refer Slide Time: 24:38)

A member of the staff had found him somehow among the identical convention rooms and handed him a stiff square of stationery. It was only a telephone number, but Shukumar knew it was the hospital. When he returned to Boston it was over. The baby had been born dead. Shoba was lying on a bed, asleep, in a private room so small there was barely enough space to stand beside her, in a wing of the hospital they hadn't been to on the tour for expectant parents. Her placenta had weakened and she'd had a caesarean, though not quickly enough. The doctor explained that these things happen. He smiled in the kindest way it was possible to smile at people known only professionally. Shoba would be back on her feet in a few weeks. There was nothing to indicate that she would not be able to have children in the future.

These days Shoba was always gone by the time Shukumar woke up. He would open his eyes and see the long black hairs she shed on her pillow and think of her, dressed, sipping her third cup of coffee already, in her office downtown, where she searched for typographical errors in textbooks and marked them, in a code she had once explained to him, with an assortment of colored pencils. She would do the same for his dissertation, she promised, when it was ready. He envied her the specificity of her task, so unlike the elusive nature of his. He was a mediocre student who had a facility for absorbing details without curiosity. Until September he had been diligent if not dedicated, summarizing chapters, outlining arguments on pads of yellow lined paper. But now he would lie in their bed until he grew bored, gazing at his side of the closet which Shoba always left partially open. At the row of the tweed jackets and corduroy trousers he would not have to choose from to teach his class next semester. After the baby died it was too late to withdraw from his teaching duties. But his adviser had things so that he had the spring semester to himself. Shukumar was in his sixth year of graduate school and the summer should give you a good push," his adviser had said. "You should be able to wrap up by next September."



A member of the staff had found him somehow among the identical convention rooms and handed him a stiff square of stationery. It was only a telephone number, but Shukumar knew it was the hospital. When he returned to Boston it was over. The baby had been born dead. Shoba was lying on a bed, asleep, in a private room so small there was barely enough space to stand beside her, in a wing of the hospital they hadn't been to on the tour for expectant parents.

Her placenta had weakened and she'd had a caesarean, though not quickly enough. The doctor explained that these things happen. He smiled in the kindest way it was possible to smile at people known only professionally. Shoba would be back on her feet in a few weeks. There was nothing to indicate that she would not be able to have children in the future.

So this is the point in the story where we have this deep dark tragedy that had affected them. They had lost a child, they had a child, they were expecting a child that was born dead. Now we are told that Shukumar was in a conference at that point of time and someone found him in the conference convention room and gave him a piece of stationery that contained hospital's phone number and when he called them the news was given to him and by the time he came back to Boston where they were staying together you know the baby was... it was all over the baby was born dead and again the space becomes very important over here.

Shobha was in a private room which was not shown to them when they had a hospital tour as expecting parents, when parents go to the hospital they take the tour of the hospital and they are been shown different rooms but this room where she was in having just lost a child was not shown to them because that was the room which wasn't really foregrounded at that point of time, when they took the tour of the hospital. And we are told that we are given the description of how this tragedy happened. Her placenta had weakened and she'd had a caesarean, but not quickly enough.

So it was an emergency, it was dramatic deterioration a very drastic deterioration of her condition and you know the doctor explained that these things happen and he gave a very professional smile. So that seems to indicate the human distance doctor has from this tragedy, from this deep dark tragedy that these two people experienced and we are told that Shobha will be back on her feet in a few weeks, there was nothing to indicate that she will not be able to have children in future. So she might be able to have children in future. And there is nothing to indicate that it is impossible anymore.

So that little paragraph over here contains a core of the human tragedy, contains the explanation of almost everything in this story, in terms of crises in communication, in terms of the distance when two people feel from each other, in terms of the alienation they have as parents etc. Okay, so we will stop at this point today and we will continue with this story in the next lecture. But what is important for us to understand is that when you look at the relationship between gender, the body corporeality discursivity in the story it all becomes very very important and all becomes very very carefully curated in Lahiri's fiction and that is something we will continue to explore in the lectures to come. Thank you for your attention.