Interpreting the uncertainty in Jhumpa Lahiri’s “A Temporary Matter”

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1. INTRODUCTION

Immigrant experience is always a topical issue. Considering the current political climate, with a wave of refugees fleeing to Europe from regions affected by war and oppression, and radicalized right-wing parties gaining power in many European countries, the need for understanding other cultures and critically reflecting on one’s own, is greater than ever. The 2011 National Curriculum for Swedish compulsory school states that: “The school should promote understanding of other people and the ability to empathize” (*Curriculum for the compulsory school, preschool class and the recreation centre, 2011*). As a teacher working with Swedish teenagers daily, due to the current colder political climate, I feel that the mission to encourage respect for others, in particular immigrants, has become even more important. What can I offer my students in order to create understanding for others, and in particular immigrants? My answer to that is the opportunity to experience intolerance, war, conflict, confusion, uncertainty, broken families and individuals, grief and loneliness by offering the experience of reading. “Reading is travelling” is an expression which is often used, and by reading books like *I Am Malala: The Girl Who Stood Up for Education and Was Shot by the Taliban* (2013) by Malala Yousafzai and Christina Lamb or *The Kite Runner* (2003) by Khaled Hosseini, we can travel to the dusty streets of Kabul or beautiful Swat Valley in Pakistan without moving an inch. In my view, reading fiction creates almost a sense of first-hand experience of, for example, living in a conflict area, and that experience should not be underestimated when actively promoting tolerance and understanding.

An American author who is regarded as being a masterful storyteller when it comes to the struggle with immigrant identity is Jhumpa Lahiri. Those who have read her work would most likely agree with me that her texts provide the reader with an intimate and realistic
insight into what it is like living between two or several cultures. How does she create this intimacy and feeling of first-hand immigrant experience? One defining feature of Lahiri’s writing is that she leaves many questions unanswered. In other words, there is an endless amount of “gaps” in her texts that it is up to the reader to fill with meaning. This is, from my point of view, an experience very true to life as there are many questions in life we can begin to attempt to answer. Along the journey towards finding an answer, you realize that you have simply ended up with even more questions unanswered. As Lahiri’s writing contains so much ambiguity, the text invites the reader to actively search for alternative interpretations, which is also a feature of this essay.

I would like to claim that Jhumpa Lahiri’s short story “A Temporary Matter” provides a reading experience that keeps the reader off balance, as the reader is thrown between the feeling of certainty and uncertainty. This experience becomes even more evident when the reader compares their reading experience between a first and subsequent reading. The point of experiencing uncertainty while reading “A Temporary Matter” is that it creates understanding for people living between two or several cultures and of ourselves, regardless if we identify ourselves as hybrid identities, or not. Other academics who also describe Lahiri’s writing as transporting its readers to an unfamiliar, or perhaps very familiar place, are Rohit K. Kulkarni, P. R. Shewale and P.A Attar, who state that:

She vividly shows the estrangement and isolation that often afflict first-and even second- generation immigrants. …This contributes to our understanding of other people and of ourselves. Lahiri uses her acute powers of observation, together with her personal experiences, to create stories that transport readers to an imaginary landscape, exploring and exposing the frailties common to all of humanity.
The uncertain reading experience offered by Lahiri in “A Temporary Matter” is skillfully juxtaposed with the main characters’, Shoba and Shukumar’s, struggle with their hybrid identities. This struggle with identity will be examined in this essay, as it contributes heavily to the unsettling reading experience. It is however important to note that the characters’ experience with second-generation immigrant identity in “A Temporary Matter” should not be viewed as something that represents everyone in a similar situation. As Robin E. Field argues about Lahiri’s writing: “Ultimately, she privileges neither connection to nor distance from cultural roots, stressing, instead, the distinctiveness of individual experiences” (“Writing the Second Generation: Negotiating Cultural Borderlands in Jhumpa Lahiri’s Interpreter of Maladies and The Namesake”, 2004 168). In other words, from a wide spectrum of possible personal experiences with hybrid identity, the analysis of “A Temporary Matter” only offers three individual experiences, namely those of the characters Shoba and Shukumar, as well as my own close reading of the short story.

1.1 Background of the author

Nilanjana Sudheshna Lahiri was born on July 11, 1967, in London, England, to Bengali parents from Calcutta, India. When Lahiri was three years old, her family relocated to the United States for work, eventually settling in South Kingstown, Rhode Island. As her school teachers found her name difficult to pronounce, Lahiri’s family nickname “Jhumpa” came to be used instead. As a student at Boston University, Jhumpa Lahiri earned three literary master’s degrees before receiving her doctorate in Renaissance studies. Her first work and collection of short stories Interpreter of Maladies was first published in 1999 and became an instant success. Interpreter of Maladies earned her the prestigious Pulitzer Prize for fiction.
and the Hemingway Foundation/PEN Award in the year 2000. *Interpreter of Maladies* became an international bestseller and has sold over 20 million copies worldwide. It was also chosen as The New Yorker's Best Debut of the Year and was on Oprah Winfrey's Top Ten Book List.

The response to Lahiri’s *Interpreter of Maladies* has been immensely positive. Michiko Kakutani of the *New York Times* praises Lahiri for her writing style as having "uncommon elegance and poise" (1999). In his review in *The New York Times* Caleb Crain states that: “She breathes unpredictable life into the page, and the reader finishes each story reseduced, wishing he could spend a whole novel with its characters. There is nothing accidental about her success; her plots are as elegantly constructed as a fine proof in mathematics” ("Subcontinental Drift", 1999). Since Lahiri’s Pulitzer Prize triumph in 2000, she has received numerous awards for her writing, also for her two novels *The Namesake* (2004) and *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008). In 2006, *The Namesake* was adapted into a film, which was equally well-received as the book.

*Interpreter of Maladies* is based on Jhumpa Lahiri’s own experiences as well as those of her parents and their Indian immigrant friends (Shea, “Interpreter of Maladies: A Rhetorical Practice Transmitting Cultural Knowledge”, 2008 2). Similar to her literary works, Lahiri’s states that her upbringing was “an amalgam of two hemispheres, … heterodox and complicated” (Lahiri, “Trading Stories: Notes from an Apprenticeship”, 2011). The short story “A Temporary Matter” is the first literary text written by Lahiri as an adult. The story is inspired by a childhood experience. When Lahiri was seven years old, her parents were close friends with another Bengali family who tragically had a stillborn son. Lahiri says: “If writing is a reaction to injustice, or a search for meaning when meaning is taken away, this was the initial meaning for me” (Lahiri, “Trading Stories: “Notes from an Apprenticeship”). The way
I read this quote is that as Lahiri continued writing and her career progressed, she found additional reasons to why she practices the art of writing.

Between 2011 and 2015 Lahiri lived in Rome in “self-imposed linguistic exile” with her husband and two children (Lahiri, “I am, in Italian, a Tougher, Freer Writer”, 2016). She has now returned to New York, and currently works at Princeton University. She has announced that she will only write in Italian from now on, and published the book *In Other Words* in 2016, which is translated from Italian to English (Lahiri, “Jhumpa Lahiri: I am, in Italian, a Tougher, Freer Writer”).

### 1.2 Transactional reader-response theory

Reader response criticism covers a broad field within literary analysis, as whenever an essay analyses the act of reading or the readers’ response to a text, the essay could be categorized as reader-response criticism (Tyson, *Critical Theory Today: A User Friendly Guide*, 2006 169). Since the focus of my essay is the reader’s experience of reading Lahiri’s “A Temporary Matter”, this theoretical approach is highly appropriate. Reader- response theory started receiving attention in the 1970s and claims that a text cannot be separated from what it does (Tyson 170). Even though there are various approaches to this theory, reader-response theorists share two beliefs, namely that the role of the reader cannot be omitted from our understanding of literature and that readers do not passively consume the meaning presented to them by an objective literary text, on the contrary, they actively create the meaning they find in literature (Tyson 170).

In this essay, I have chosen to use transactional reader-response theory in order to carry out my analysis. Transactional reader-response theory, often associated with the work of Louise
Rosenblatt, analyses the transaction between text and reader. Rosenblatt claims that both the text and the reader are necessary in the production of meaning. She uses the terms text, reader and poem. The reader is a reference to the critic analyzing his or her own carefully documented reading experience. In this essay, I am that reader. The text consists of the actual words written on a page, and poem refers to the literary work produced by the text and reader together (Tyson 173). In other words, the analysis I produce about “A Temporary Matter” is what Rosenblatt calls a poem, a product of a transaction between text and reader.

In my analysis of “A Temporary Matter” Wolfgang Iser’s terms determinate meaning and indeterminate meaning come in useful. The former term refers to what could be labeled as the facts of a text, for example, actual events, plots and physical descriptions provided by the words on the page (Tyson 174). The term indeterminate meaning however, refers to the “gaps” in a literary text, the events and actions that are not clearly explained or that appear to have several explanations (Tyson 174). In these cases, the reader might even be invited to create their own interpretation. The exchange between determinate and indeterminate meanings while reading, results in a number of ongoing experiences for the reader. The experiences can be retrospection, reflecting back on what’s been read earlier, anticipation of what will happen next, or fulfillment of or disappointment in what was expected, meaning the revision of our understanding of events and characters (Tyson 174). Something that first appears to be determinate meaning in a text, might often appear to be indeterminate as the reader’s point of view switches between the different perspectives provided (Tyson 174). Iser believes that the text guides us through the processes involved in projecting meaning into a text. This principle will be applied throughout my analysis.

In all literary analysis the analyst runs a risk of relying on too many personal projections,
especially in the case of reader-response as it focuses so explicitly on subjective reading. Tyson states:

According to transactional theorists, different readers come up with different acceptable interpretations because the text allows for a range of acceptable meanings, that is a range of meanings for which textual support is available. However, because there is a real text involved in this process to which we must refer to justify or modify our responses, not all readings are acceptable and some are more so than others. (174)

This means that it is worth noting that there is a risk of reading a text too subjectively. My awareness of this will lead me to examine both the text and my own responses in depth and detail. Also, the ideas argued for in the analysis will be supported with rigorous textual evidence in the form of quotes.

1.3 Negatives

In her article “A Sociostylistic Perspective on Negatives and the Disnarrated: Lahiri, Roy, Rushdie” Laura Karttunen points out that negatives in narratives are significant in literary analysis (2008 419). The definition of negative in the Oxford Online Reference offers the following definition of the noun “negative”:

**Negative, n**

d. A negative word; a term expressing or conveying negation.
Determining from the examples of negatives that Karttunen uses in her article goes to show that she uses the definition as a negative word or term expressing or conveying negation. According to Karttunen, negatives can serve two purposes. She exemplifies the first function with the sentence “The queen wasn’t wearing a hat” (420), meaning that this event is reportable as it is exceptional that the queen did not wear a hat. To describe the second function Karttunen uses “In the end, the plane didn’t crash” (420). This event which is not exceptional in any way, is still rendered tellable and significant because it brings up the non-normative possibility of the plane crashing. Both examples highlight a sense of what is possible or probable (Karttunen 420). In the case of this essay, the use and meaning of negatives used in “A Temporary Matter” will be discussed.

In summary, as the focus of the analysis that follows will focus on the reader’s experience of reading Lahiri’s “A Temporary Matter”, transactional reader–response theory is a useful theoretical perspective to be used. Second, the terms determinate and indeterminate meaning will come to much use. Third, the term reader in the analysis is a reference to a critic who has carefully documented their reading experience, namely me. Lastly, the use of negatives in “A Temporary Matter” will be discussed in this essay.

1.4 Literature Review

“A Temporary Matter” belongs to a collection consisting of nine short stories by Lahiri, named *Interpreter of Maladies*. These short stories are loosely connected, therefore my literature review will focus much on *Interpreter of Maladies* the collection, not on “A Temporary Matter” alone. Ever since the publication of Jhumpa Lahiri’s *Interpreter of Maladies* in 1999, this piece of literary work has been of great interest for researchers. A
general search on the title in the MLA database yields 50 entries. The focus of these texts can be divided into many categories, which now will be presented.

Immigrant experience and identity are undoubtedly the aspects of *Interpreter of Maladies* which have been explored the most by researchers. One of the earliest studies written is “Writing the Second Generation: Negotiating Cultural Borderlands in Jhumpa Lahiri’s *Interpreter of Maladies* and the *Namesake*” by Robin Field in 2004. Field points out, as opposed to first-generation immigrants, second-generation immigrants are in a particularly vexed position in regard to identity. Field argues that the second-generation exist in a “liminal space of cultural borderlands” between the United States and family’s country of origin (166). Furthermore, this group is constantly negotiating their cultural roots and their American lifestyles. As common as it is for the second generation to celebrate having several homelands, it is equally common for this group to experience a dual alienation (Field, 166). This is due to the fact that children of immigrants observe a largely static representation of their cultural inheritance in their daily lives. Field explains that the process of cultural formation has elements that are partly inherited, partly modified and also partly invented.

Joel Kuortti also discusses immigrant identity in his article “Problematic hybrid identity in the diasporic writings of Jhumpa Lahiri”, in particular the term hybrid identity (2007). He examines the ways in which Lahiri’s writing engages with the issue of translation, as well as non-translation, of identity from a post-colonial perspective. He states that the colonialists, on arrival in the colony, assumed ownership over something the colonialists viewed as emptiness. However, this emptiness never existed, the colonialists simply ignored what was already in the space they colonized. Kuortti argues that Lahiri’s short stories in *Interpreter of Maladies* are set in similar post-colonial situations, meaning that discoveries of empty spaces
are unattainable. Kuortti argues that something similar to empty spaces can be found in Lahiri’s stories in questions of identity, however, it is not a space of emptiness but what should be called hybridity. A hybrid identity is in other words a third identity, which is a mixture of at least two cultural identities.

Closely linked to the subject of immigrant identity, gender in Lahiri’s short stories has also been of interest, in particular non-traditional male gender roles. Both Bonnie Zare in “Evolving Masculinities in Recent Stories by South Asian American Women” (2007) and Lavina Dhingra in “Feminizing men? Moving Beyond Asian American Literary Gender Wars in Jhumpa Lahiri’s Fiction” (2012) deal with how Lahiri’s writing “transcends and challenges” the Asian American portrayal of an Indian man (Dhingra 135). Dhinga argues that Lahiri is unusual among South Asian American female writers as she mostly uses numerous male characters in her short stories in *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999).

The significance of food and cooking in *Interpreter of Maladies* has also been of interest for researchers. In Shweta Garg’s “Interpreting a Culinary Montage: Food in Jhumpa Lahiri’s *Interpreter of Maladies*” (2012) she argues that food acts as an aid to compensate for the understated narrative style of Lahiri. Food and its various significances give the reader a wide spectrum of interpretative possibilities. In the case of “A Temporary Matter” she states that the tension that has been building up even since the stillbirth of their child, is manifested by the food habits of the couple and the condition of their kitchen. Garg theorizes that the overwhelming presence of food reflects happiness the couple once experiences together. She also draws attention to the fact that Shoba goes from being a meticulous and ambitious cook, to not cooking at all. After the tragic stillbirth, Shoba and Shukumar interchange their normative roles. Shoba, who was a server and a cook, becomes a passive consumer, whereas
Shukumar becomes the active producer and facilitator in the kitchen. Garg argues further that cooking gives Shukumar the solace he needs, the kitchen becoming a “protective fold” for him, and their home comforts him instead of restricts him (76). On the contrary, for Shoba, the home and kitchen stifle her and provides no comfort. Garg also brings to light the fact that earlier in the couple’s relationship Shoba used to document “her culinary endeavors meticulously including the date she cooked a particular dish for the first time and her personal omissions and exclusions from the given recipe” (Garg 76). The recipes become a memoir of the couple’s life together.

Similar to Garg, Laura Williams in “Foodways and Subjectivity in Jhumpa Lahiri’s Interpreter of Maladies” (2007) argues that the state of Shoba and Shukumar’s marriage is reflected in their cooking and eating habits. Williams brings up the fact that Shukumar loves Shoba for her remarkable ability to plan ahead which is reflected in the abundance of her pantry. However, she also states that Shukumar takes Shoba’s preparedness for granted. Williams continues: “Whereas Shoba’s emotional state is reflected in the abundance of her pantry, or the increasing emptiness of the shelves, Shukumar can be characterized by his consumption” (71). When Shukumar exhausts his wife’s well-stocked pantry without replenishing it and also being completely dependent on her culinary knowledge when cooking, it gives an indication of his emotional neglect towards Shoba. Williams argues that Shukumar’s nutritionally and psychically consumptive presence is too exhaustive for Shoba, and it the reason for her wanting to leave their relationship.

Since the focus for this essay will be on the reader’s response to Lahiri’s “A Temporary Matter”, it is relevant to discuss texts written about the rhetoric in Interpreter of Maladies. Ever since the publication of the collection of short stories, several articles focusing on
Lahiri’s use of rhetoric have been written. In “Interpreter of Maladies: A Rhetorical Practice Transmitting Cultural Knowledge”, Taylor Shea uses George Kennedy’s approach to rhetoric which states that rhetorical practices transmit cultural human knowledge (2008). Shea points out that Lahiri uses her cultural background as an Indian American to create stories and protagonists that represent the juxtaposition in her own life. In order words, similar juxtapositions are found in the short stories in Interpreter of Maladies. He also theorizes regarding how the name Interpreter of Maladies works on many levels. Firstly, it is the title of Lahiri’s collection of short stories. Secondly, there is a short story in the collection with the same name. Lastly, he argues that it may be the title of Jhumpa Lahiri herself as an author. He argues that Lahiri, due to her cross-cultural background, feels obliged to interpret the troubling stories of her family and friends and others of the same background.

Lahiri’s use of stylistics is examined by Sapna Thakur in her M. Phil. dissertation “Displacement in Bharati Mukherjee’s Darkness and Jhumpa Lahiri’s Interpreter of Maladies” (2011). She argues that, similar to other contemporary post-colonial works of fiction, the characters in Interpreter of Maladies have fluid identities (46). Furthermore, these characters are physically located in the USA, however, psychologically they are in India. Thakur also mentions that the use of realism is a defining trait of Lahiri’s writing and describes her style as reliable (49, 47). Just like Thakur argues that the characters are fluid, Daniela Rogobete points out that they are frail and constantly in a state of change, and due to this, the objects in Lahiri’s short stories carry an important role in stabilizing and counterbalancing these “diseased souls” (“Towards a Poetics of Small Things. Objects and Objectification of Loss in Jhumpa Lahiri’s Interpreter of Maladies”, 2012 101). Rogobete contends that objects in Lahiri’s writing “seem to acquire a life of their own, operating on different levels and different guises” (101). These objects can act as silent mediators in
dysfunctional relationships or as mediators for characters with fluid identities, as substitutes for a lost home or identity or as metaphorical containers of the mixed emotions experienced by Lahiri’s characters, mostly translated through food metaphors. Rogobete argues that Lahiri illustrates everyday objects in rich detail because they are constructed around an entire process of management of uncertainty. The objects participate in “an operation of disambiguation that originates in the need for specificity and certainty in a world afflicted by a permanent identity search” (102).

2. ANALYSIS

Since my thesis statement is that Jhumpa Lahiri’s short story “A Temporary Matter” provides a reading experience that keeps the reader off balance, and that the reader is thrown between the feeling of certainty and uncertainty, this essay will firstly examine why the two main characters in “A Temporary Matter” could be described as diseased souls and the significance of this. Secondly, thematic evidence of certainty and uncertainty in the text is brought forward when examining how it is mirrored in the main characters themselves. Furthermore, how the couple struggle with the unpredictability in their lives and their second-generation identities is covered. Thirdly, evidence of how food is used as a metaphor for the couple’s emotions is presented and discussed. Fourth, the significance of negatives in Lahiri’s short story is examined. Lastly, from a reader-response theorist’s perspective the act of reading equals the creation of meaning, hence the significance of not engaging in reading in the text is analyzed.

In order to give the analysis a context, a brief summary of the plot of Lahiri’s short story “A Temporary Matter” is now offered. The narrative is about the married couple, Shoba and
Shukumar. They both are of Indian heritage, but have lived in the US their whole lives. We are told how happy they were when newly married, but their lives change when their first child is stillborn. The couple deal with the tragedy differently but both start avoiding each others’ company. Six months after the miscarriage the couple has to spend five consecutive nights together in their home without electricity, due to necessary repair work on an electric line. During these nights they start sharing secrets about themselves which will come to have consequences for their marriage.

2.1 Two diseased souls

The two main characters in Lahiri’ “A Temporary Matter” (Interpreter of Maladies 1999), Shoba and Shukumar, are both lost, fluid and frail. Rogobete, who has examined the characters in all nine short stories in Lahiri’s Interpreter of Maladies, argues that they contain characters that are frail and constantly in a state of change. Her term for these characters is a “diseased soul” and in the case of “A Temporary Matter” both main characters, Shoba and Skukumar, fit this description. How Shukumar can be characterized as a diseased soul will be examined first. Rogobete describes the diseased souls as “People who find themselves alone in their own houses, families or relationships, reduced to their incapacity to reach out and express their feelings, unable to find a sense of certainty in the small world they inhabit, turn instead towards insignificant objects that might provide them with a solid, reliable support” (104). There is a high degree of determinate evidence in the text that reveals how Shukumar is a fluid character or a diseased soul. For example, the text shows how Shukumar is worried about the state of his marriage: “he thought of how he and Shoba had become experts at avoiding each other in their three-bedroom house, spending as much time on separate floors as possible” (Lahiri, Interpreter of Maldies 4). In other words, he finds himself alone in their
home and relationship, both physically and psychologically, as the couple avoid contact and communication with each other. The passage above creates many emotional responses for the reader. Firstly, any human being can relate to the feeling of loneliness that Shukumar describes, as everyone has felt lonely at some point in their lives. Second, for a couple going through the traumatic experience of a stillbirth, the most logical behavior should be to support each other and truly be there for each other, not stop communicating as in the case of Shoba and Shukumar. I as a reader who has experienced the grief of several miscarriages, as well as the ecstatic joy of finally becoming a mother, believe that the distance created between Shoba and Shukumar is a realistic and a commonplace description of how people can deal with grief and the loss of a child. The trauma paralyzes the person to the extent that reaching out or opening up to someone is far too great of an effort. Third, the reader feels sympathy for Shukumar as he seems to be saying that the only thing he and his wife have succeeded with after the traumatic event is becoming “experts” at avoiding each other. Shukumar also ponders the fact that: “In the beginning he had believed that it would pass, that he and Shoba would get through it all somehow. She was only thirty-three. She was strong, on her feet again. But it wasn’t a consolation” (Lahiri 5). This is an example of how Shukumar is reduced to his incapacity to reach out and express his feelings, as the reader gets a clear sense that Shukumar has given up hope of himself being able to mend the couple’s relationship and has therefore stopped talking to his wife. Once again, as a reader with experience of both grief and bliss in a similar context, my first reaction is that I strongly do not want Shukumar to give up hope of mending his marriage, nor the possibility of becoming a parent. This reaction would undoubtedly have been different if, for example, I was not a parent myself today or if I had been in the midst of the same grief that Shoba and Shukumar are experiencing.
Just like the other diseased souls that Rogobete refers to in *Interpreter of Maladies*, Shukumar, instead of verbally communicating with his wife, turns towards an ordinary everyday activity that provides him with a solid, reliable support, namely cooking: “Shukumar gathered onion skins in his hands and let them drop into the garbage pail, on top of the ribbons of fat he’d trimmed from the lamb. He ran the water in the sink, soaked the knife and the cutting board, and rubbed a lemon half along his fingertips to get rid of the garlic smell, a trick he’d learned from Shoba” (Lahiri 5). As argued by Rogobete, the ritual of cooking provides certainty and stability to Shukumar who is in need of it (104). Similar to Shukumar, this description of how he goes about cooking provides also the reader with certainty, in other words, determinate meaning, as it describes physical objects that are unchanging. My response as a reader to all the passages mentioned above, as they appear in that particular order, is that it is an emotional and confusing experience. The first two passages are open for interpretation and keep me as a reader preoccupied with trying to fill them with meaning and logic, whereas the description of Shukumar cooking provides me with a welcome break from this activity, as it deals with tacit and physical objects and realistic descriptions of how life still goes on, even after such a traumatic experience as the death of a child.

How Shoba fits the description of a diseased soul will now be examined. The text provides the reader with the following cue: “Each day, Shukumar noticed, her beauty, which had once overwhelmed him, seemed to fade. The cosmetics that had seemed superfluous were necessary now, not to improve her but to define her somehow” (Lahiri 14). At a first reading the reader might respond by thinking that Shukumar is hurt by the fact that Shoba avoids his company and therefore wants to criticize his wife’s fading looks. Alternatively, the reader interprets the passage as an indication of Shukumar’s feelings lessening for his wife. After subsequent readings however, with the knowledge of more details from the text, the passage
strongly indicates that Shoba is suffering from postpartum depression. After the tragic stillbirth of the couple’s child, Shoba’s very core has been ripped to pieces, and now needs the help of insignificant objects, in this case make-up, to define her or to stabilize her. Once again, the description of a diseased soul provided by Rogobete is useful, namely the fact that they turn “towards insignificant objects that might provide them with a solid, reliable support” (104). Once again, as a woman and a mother I feel as a reader the deepest sympathy for Shoba as this is clearly one of the worst scenarios a parent can go through. Apart from relying on make-up in order to cope with the trauma of losing a child, and in order to stabilize her fluid being, Shoba takes refuge in her work as a proof-reader and is almost inseparable from her “arsenal of colored pencils” (Lahiri 8). My interpretation of Shoba’s preoccupation with proof-reading texts is that it is an activity that provides her with a welcome distraction from her life that has not worked the way she planned. Just like she avoids contact with her husband, she avoids thinking about her life and loss. From Shoba’s point of view, the more insignificant details she can focus on, i.e. the arsenal or abundance of colored pencils, which all represent different types of typographic errors, the better. In other words, Shoba relies on her colored pencils to keep her distracted and by holding them in her hand, they provide her with certainty and stability.

2.2 A struggle with uncertainty and identity

The reader’s experience of uncertainty is mirrored in the main characters, Shoba and Shukumar, and I will now examine how the two deal with the uncertainty in their lives and life in general. Furthermore, their ways of dealing with their second-generation identities, an often uncertain experience, will be analyzed.
Shoba’s choice of profession, being a proofreader, reflects her character and behavior before the stillbirth extremely well as she is highly organized and plans all aspects of life meticulously. Shukumar observes that: “It was typical of her. She was the type to prepare for surprises, good and bad” (6) and that “It astonished him, her capacity to think ahead” (6). The baby the couple was expecting was planned for with skilled precision. For example, we are told how the couple had carefully prepared their unborn child’s room: “By the end of August there was a cherry crib under the window, a white changing table with mint green knobs, and a rocking chair with checkered cushions” (8). We are also told how Shoba already had made the preparations for the child’s rice ceremony, an Indian tradition to mark a child’s first intake of solid food: “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” (Lahiri 11). Shoba has little experience of dealing with uncertainty as she continuously attempts to eliminate ambiguity of all kinds.

Shukumar has much more long term experience of dealing with uncertainty in his life, at least on the surface, compared to Shoba. I would like to argue that not only has the stillbirth of the couple’s child thrown Shukumar off balance, he has also been confused about his identity ever since he was a young adult. As Field states, second generation immigrants, such as Shukumar, are in a particularly difficult situation in this regard (165). She argues that the second generation is constantly negotiating their understanding of themselves and trying to balance their American lifestyle with their cultural inheritance (166). Shukumar’s interest in knowing more about his Indian heritage comes about after the death of his father and he therefore starts studying Indian culture at university. Field points out in the context of all the short stories in Interpreter of Maladies, not specifically “A Temporary Matter that: “Lahiri also demonstrates how the second generation is educated about their roots, often not through
a process of formal education, but as a private, familiar experience” (170). Shukumar has not experienced this familiar transaction of cultural knowledge while growing up and the text says: “As a teenager he preferred sailing camp or scooping ice cream during the summers to going to Calcutta” (Lahiri 12). Instead he seeks knowledge about his ethnicity in formal education, which indicates that he is searching for an understanding of his Indian background. When someone is in search of their identity it often suggests that there is a void or emptiness within that person, and this is how I interpreted Shukumar for a long time. However, having encountered the definition of hybrid identity offered by Joel Kuortti, it has changed my perspective on how I read the character Shukumar. Kuortti explains that the colonialists, on arrival in the colony, assumed ownership over something the colonialists viewed as emptiness (215). However, this emptiness never existed, the colonialists simply ignored what was already in the space they colonized. Kuortti argues that Lahiri’s short stories in Interpreter of Maladies are set in similar post-colonial situations, meaning that discoveries of empty spaces are impossible to attain as it is not a space of emptiness but what should be called hybridity (215). If Kuortti’s definition of hybrid identity is applied to this particular reading experience of “A Temporary Matter”, the reader would be the colonialist and Shukumar would be the person affected by colonialism. I, the reader, with my Western perspective, quickly make the assumption that Shukumar has a void within himself that he needs to fill with a certain cultural identity. Having become aware of this, I will from now on refer to Shukumar and Shoba’s cultural identities as hybrid. This means that they are not culturally American, nor Indian but a third cultural identity which is a mix, or hybrid, of both. In this hybrid identity there is nothing missing, instead, it has access to more perspectives to interpret life, compared to someone non-hybrid.

As already established in this essay, Shukumar is on a quest for knowing more about the
Indian part of his identity by engaging in higher studies. Not surprisingly, he meets his future wife, Shoba, at University at a recital by Bengali poets and that “he was unable to decipher the literary dictation, and couldn’t join the rest of the audience as they sighed and nodded after certain phrases” (Lahiri 13). On a first reading the reader might react by thinking this is a pleasant coincidence for the two. However, after subsequent readings the reader can be less certain of this, knowing that Shukumar is not at the recital by coincidence. He is there because of a conflict within him and confused about what perspective, traditionally American or Indian, he should use in life. I interpret the fact that he is unable to understand the poetic Bengali diction as symbolic for Shukumar being confused about his hybrid identity. Shukumar is very likely to have access to Indian culture and its people in Bengali, but only to a certain point. When it comes to more dense poetry in the same language, he is excluded from this experience. Instead he experiences the poetic recital from the perspective of an American, namely by not being able to interpret the situation.

I will now offer another passage I find symbolic for Shukumar’s way of dealing with his confusion with a hybrid identity. It is a secret Shukumar tells Shoba during one evening without electricity:

“I cheated on my Oriental Civilization exam in college” he said. “It was my last semester, my last set of exams. My father had died a few months before. I could see the blue book of the guy next to me. He was an American guy, a maniac. He knew Urdu and Sanskrit. I couldn’t remember if the verse we had to identify was an example of a ghazal or not. I looked at his answer and copied it down. (Lahiri 17).

Similar to cheating on an exam, Shukumar repeats the same behavior when trying to resolve
the confusion with his identity, namely by taking a shortcut. He finds Shoba who is confident in general, has a clear direction in life and, most importantly, on the surface is comfortable with her hybrid identity. Shoba is the female version of the classmate who had all the answers to the Oriental Civilization exam (“He was an American guy, a maniac. He knew Urdu and Sanskrit”), so Shukumar marries her and copies her ways. One example of how Shukumar copies Shoba, is when the reader is told how he learns to cook. The text tells us how Shukumar initially watches in awe when Shoba, while pregnant, pushes through the crowds of people at lively food markets and barters with the Indian vegetable sellers and observes her as she marinates peppers in rosemary and cooks plum and tomato chutneys (Lahiri 7). The reader is then told that: “Every other Saturday they wound through the maze of stalls Shukumar eventually knew by heart” (Lahiri 7). Through marrying Shoba and sharing his life with her, Shukumar planned to settle his confusion with hybrid identity and live in harmony between two cultures, American and Indian. After subsequent readings, the reader knows that Shukumar’s plan was not successful, and by offering an analysis of Shoba’s hybrid identity, an explanation for this might be found.

As seen earlier in this essay, Shoba’s confidence and, on the surface, successful way of dealing with her hybrid identity is almost flawless. The security she shows on the outside is what Shukumar is drawn to, and what he tries to appropriate. The reader is also told how Shoba has spent a lot of time in India in her childhood, has first-hand experience of Indian traditions such as a rice ceremony and with ease communicates in Begali with Shukumar’s mother. In other words, she does not fall into the category of second-generation immigrants who often have static representation of their parents’ culture (Field 166). After subsequent readings, there is however a part of her Indian heritage that Shoba cannot deal with, the shame in her Indian mother's eyes connected to losing a child. The reader is told how Shoba’s
mother came to stay with the couple for two months after the stillbirth. The determinate description given by the text says: “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” (Lahiri 9). Given all the fact in the text that show how Westernized Shoba really is, for example, how she financially supports her husband while he is a student and that she sometimes goes for a drink with her non-Indian friend Gillian, indicates that she must have a hard time dealing with her mother setting up a shrine in her home, in hope of a healthy grandchild. From my Western perspective, such a shrine in my home under those circumstances, would eventually come to symbolize an immense failure from my part to produce a child. In effect, there are no words for Shoba’s grief and her hybrid identity is anything but balanced and certain. In the light of this, Shoba’s earlier extraordinary ability to plan and prepare for all types of uncertainty in life, seems to be a strategy to compensate for an innate second-generation conflict with identity.

2.3 Food as a translator for emotions

As seen in many cases in this analysis, determinate descriptions of food and cooking in “A Temporary Matter” often provide stability to the diseased souls, Shoba and Shukumar. In effect, when the characters are stabilized by these descriptions, the reading experience becomes less uncertain. The analysis that follows will highlight how these descriptions of food can also be read metaphorically, and more specifically, to reflect the relationship of Shoba and Shukumar. Before the stillbirth, their home is a welcoming and loving place. The reader is, for example, told how “Shoba would throw together meals that appeared to have taken half a day to prepare” (Lahiri 7). Also, that Shoba arranged a surprise birthday party for
her husband and one-hundred and twenty people had crammed into their small house (Lahiri 9). Shoba used to enjoy cooking and did so with preparedness:

> When she used to do the shopping, the pantry was always stocked with extra bottles of olive and corn oil, depending on whether they were cooking Italian or Indian. There were countless boxes of pasta in all shapes and colors, zippered sacks of basmati rice, whole sides of lamb and goats from the Muslim butchers at haymarket, chopped up and frozen in countless plastic bags. (Lahiri 7).

However, after the tragic event and the couple’s marriage is starting to fall apart we are told the following:

> For months now they’d served themselves from the stove and he’d taken his plate into the study, letting the meal grow cold on the desk before shoving it into his mouth without pause, while Shoba took her plate to the living room and watched game shows or proofread with her arsenal of colored pencils at hand. (Lahiri 8).

It is perfectly valid to argue that these provide determinate meaning and that they generate the feeling of stability and security for the reader. However, here it is possible to expand on this idea and use Rogobete’s theory which states that Lahiri uses the description of the material world as a translator of human emotions (102). The perfectly functioning and neatly organized kitchen is symbolic for a happy and functioning marriage, whereas a neglected kitchen with the food consumed, often cold, elsewhere in the house reflects an ill-functioning and unhappy relationship. It is also possible to see the amount of food or quality of the dishes made in the couple’s kitchen as an indication of the couple’s feelings towards each other.

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As Garg points out “The overwhelming presence of food implies the emotional surplus in the couple’s relationship” (75). In other words, an abundance of well organized ingredients equals love are care for one another, and the deficiency of ingredients symbolizes the lack of loving emotions. After subsequent readings I have an additional reading of this contrast between a well stocked pantry and a neglected kitchen. When putting this exceptional amount of time and energy into organizing one’s home and cooking elaborate meals limits the chances for spontaneity in life. The time the couple spend on organizing the home could be spent on outdoor activities, spontaneously visiting friends, watching films or lovemaking.

I am aware that this is a response from my own, Western perspective, where free time is seen as one of the highest privileges since this is what people often lack in modern society. However, this idea could be applied in the context of Shoba and Shukumar, as both of them are busy with managing jobs, studies, going to the gym, friends and family. By using this perspective, a time-consuming and well-organized home symbolizes a sort of emptiness or shallowness. It is there for the sake of others, for others to admire, not to benefit the couple themselves. In putting all that time into, for example preparing meals from advanced recipes, signals that the couple do not prioritize the time they could have together. A neglected kitchen in this case is symbolic for an ambitious venture that did not work go to plan.

In order to provide another perspective on how the passages above can be read, it is useful to include Williams who argues that it is only Shoba’s emotional state that is reflected in the abundance or lack of ingredients in the pantry (71). When Shoba is happy the shelves are full and when she is distraught the pantry becomes empty. Shukumar on the other hand, can be characterized by his consumption, according to Williams (71). She continues: “Shukumar’s exhaustion of Shoba’s well-stocked pantry, without replenishing it, therefore becomes a signifier of the way he has exhausted and emptied his wife, the way he has assumed their
marital problems were temporary without investing any care in restoring or replenishing their relationship” (Williams 72). Once again, in my view, there are many ways of interpreting the fact that Shukumar does not fill up the pantry after using the ingredients, and these will now be presented. First, as argued before, the fact that Shukumar does not leave the house to, for example, go shopping for food could be his way of trying to mend their dysfunctional relationship. He waits for Shoba in their home and is ready to relate to her once she starts communicating again. Second, just like Williams argues, Shukumar is a consumer of Shoba’s energy and ability to plan ahead (71). He relies heavily on her different abilities, but does not give anything in return. Last, it could be possible to view the situation from a postcolonial perspective, similar to the one provided by Kuortti. Shukumar has appropriated Shoba’s cooking methods and could therefore be seen as the colonialist. Shoba is the colony which is depleted of its natural resources and culture, in this case food and knowing how to cook.

2.4 The significance of negatives

There is an endless multitude of interpretations of textual cues in “A Temporary Matter” which provide indeterminate meaning for the reader and which provide uncertainty. However, the use of negatives in the short story is significant as it reveals details that are reportable. As Karttunen theorizes, the use of negatives in narratives is significant in literary analysis because it reveals details that are reportable and should be told (420). In the beginning of the short story a glimpse of what the couple’s life was like before the stillbirth of their first child is given. We are told how Shukumar:

… watched in disbelief as she bought more food, trailing behind her with canvas bags as she pushed through the crowd, arguing under the morning sun with boys too
young to shave but already missing teeth, who twisted up brown paper bags of artichokes, plums, gingerroot, and yams, and dropped them on their scales, and tossed them to Shoba one by one. She didn’t mind being jostled, even when she was pregnant. She was tall, and broad-shouldered, with hips her obstetrician assured her were made for childbearing. During the drive back home, as the car curved along the Charles, they invariably marveled at how much food they’d bought.

It never went to waste. When friends dropped by, Shoba would throw together meals that appeared to have taken half a day to prepare. (Lahiri 7).

In the sentence “It never went to waste” the obvious and literal meaning of “it” is the food. Also, it is directly followed by a sentence about Shoba cooking for their friends, stating that the ingredients bought at the market were all used up. Hence in the first encounter with this passage the reader thinks that that “it” is simply a reference to food. However, after subsequent readings and when knowing how the story ends, it is possible to read this as having the opposite meaning. As Prince argues, the use of negatives can carry significant meaning in a text and the fact that “it never went to waste” signals that the sentence could be read ironically since the exact opposite happened: Shoba’s nurturing and well-laid plans were wasted, as there is no child. The two sentences earlier in the passage (“She didn’t mind being jostled, even when she was pregnant. She was tall, and broad-shouldered, with hips her obstetrician assured her were made for childbearing”) seem to encourage this association as the rest of the passage, before and after, are about food, not Shoba potential for childbearing. Another clue for this interpretation is the fact that “It never went to waste” is used as a topic sentence, i.e. in the beginning of a new paragraph. As a topic sentence announces a change of subject and introduces something new, it signals that “it” could and should be about something else than food. After subsequent readings, another alternative interpretation could
be that “it” refers to Shukumar’s own efforts being wasted. His efforts to get married, buy a house and finally to finish his teaching studies, should have resulted in a child.

The second sentence that is examined and that offers an uncertain reading experience for the reader is when: “There was nothing to indicate that she would not be able to have children in the future” (Lahiri 4). On a first reading the reader treats this passage as having determinate meaning, in other words stating the fact that Shoba would be able to have children in the future. However, after subsequent readings this sentence could be interpreted differently. My own interpretation of this sentence is that it signals the exact opposite, namely that there could be something that indicates that Shoba would not be able to have children in the future. According to Karttunen the use of negatives can bring into focus the social norm that a person has failed to live up to and therefore the use of this (double) negative is significant here (420). This particular sentence highlights the norm that says that women who want to children can normally have children. The usage of the negative form in this sentence draws attention to the fact that there is an underlying worry, also when considering the first failed attempt, that there could be something that prevents Shoba from giving birth to a healthy child. Another significant detail of this sentence is that it is not merely a negative sentence, but a double negative. It reveals the basic attitude of the speaker, in this case Shukumar, as pessimistic, rather than optimistic. An optimistic speaker would say “Everything indicated that Shoba would be able to have children in the future”. In contrast, using two negatives shows that the speaker anticipates problems, even when they say that everything is in order.

2.5 The significance of not reading

As the theoretical approach I have chosen for this essay states that both the text and the
reader are necessary in the production of meaning, it is highly relevant to pay attention to the reading activities carried out by Shoba. Firstly, Shoba’s reading of recipes before the stillbirth, in a happy time, is examined. In “A Temporary Matter” the reader is told how attentively Shoba reads recipes. As Garg points out, Shoba used to document “her culinary endeavors meticulously including the date she cooked a particular dish for the first time and her personal omissions and exclusions from the given recipe” (76). From a reader- response theorist’s perspective this signifies that by making her own adjustments to the text, she creates meaning to the words in the recipe. The recipe books, without Shoba’s personal notes would simply be texts that could be placed in any context. As she also writes a note of when she has cooked the different dishes for her end her husband, Garg argues that the recipes become a memoir of the couple’s life together (76). I certainly agree with this statement, but I would also like to add that that Shoba’s way of engaging in the text reflects her happy state of mind and love for Shukumar.

Secondly, the text says that: “The fourth night, she said that she never liked the one poem he’d ever published in his life, in a literary magazine in Utah. He’d written the poem after meeting Shoba. She added that she found the poem sentimental” (Lahiri 19). The first time the reader encounters this passage in “A Temporary Matter” it is a confusing experience, as there are no more references to this particular poem in the short story. The reader anticipates more of an explanation as to why Shoba suddenly makes this sort of confession, but is left feeling puzzled and uncertain. After subsequent readings, there is an alternative interpretation from a reader- response theorist’s point of view. By reading the poem and forming her opinion of it, Shoba has participated in creating meaning to the text, an in extent, to Shukumar. However, by criticizing the poem and labeling it as sentimental is an indication of Shoba’s unwillingness to read more of her husband’s texts. Here the reader is given a strong
indication of what is coming later in the short story, namely that Shoba is planning to move out of the couple’s house. There are many possible reasons to why she calls the poem sentimental. First, as the reader is told that the poem is written after the couple has met, signals that the poem is somehow about the two of them. As argued earlier in this essay, Shukumar marries Shoba because he plans to use her as his cultural interpreter between Indian and American culture. By stating that the poem is sentimental, Shoba might want to say that she is no longer interested in being his cultural translator. Second, it might be Shoba’s way of saying that she is tired of being consumed by Shukumar and that she does not want to continue with creating meaning in his life.

Lastly, the act of not engaging at all in reading is a powerful revelation for a reader-response theoretical perspective. In “A Temporary Matter” Shukumar is working on a text, namely a dissertation. Before the miscarriage Shukumar “had been diligent if not dedicated, summarizing chapters, outlining arguments on pads of yellow lined paper” (Lahiri 4), however, after the tragic event Shukumar is unable to continue his work. We are told that Shoba will proofread his dissertation once it is finished. The fact that Shoba does not read Shukumar’s text means that the text is drained of meaning and, by extension, the Shukumar, as well as the reader experiences meaninglessness. The opposite, would signal not just giving the dissertation meaning, but also a sense of direction to Shukumar. By Shoba carefully going through the text and color-coding the typographical errors, she would give the dissertation meaning and breathe life into the pages, it would be an act of love.

3. CONCLUSION

Lahiri’s short story “A Temporary Matter” provides a reading experience which keeps the
reader off balance, as the reader is thrown between certainty and uncertainty. Due to Lahiri’s understated narrative style, the text invites the reader to actively search for alternative interpretations. This transactional reader-response analysis shows how both main characters in the short story, Shoba and Shukumar, could be described as diseased, lost or frail souls. This is because both find themselves physically and psychologically isolated from other people, unable to express their emotions and not capable of finding a sense of certainty in their lives. As the characters feel uncertainty, the reader experiences the same. As diseased souls, Shoba and Shukumar turn instead towards insignificant commonplace object and activities in order to provide them with reliable support. In the case of Shukumar, he has found the art of cooking and Shoba has taken on increasing amounts of work as proof-reader, never far from an arsenal of colored pencils. These determinate descriptions of everyday activities provide certainty to the characters, as well as the reader.

The reader’s experience of uncertainty is mirrored in the main characters of “A Temporary Matter”. The married couple, Shoba and Shukumar, are faced with the tragedy of a stillborn child. Apart from having to deal with their grief, they both struggle with uncertain hybrid identities in different ways. After subsequent readings, the reader can come to the conclusion that Shoba has always used the strategy of being a meticulous organizer and planner, in order to deal with her hybridity. In this way, she tries to eliminate all possibilities of uncertainty in her life. Her husband Shukumar, on the other hand, finds Shoba and marries her in order to settle his confusion with identity. As Shoba, on the surface, can deal successfully with her hybrid identity, Shukumar plans to appropriate her lifestyle.

As Shoba and Shukumar are unable to communicate with each other in the text, the descriptions of food replace that function, and become metaphors for the couple’s emotions.
Among many theories on how to interpret these metaphors, Williams argues that a well-stocked pantry or empty shelves in the kitchen is a reflection of the female protagonist Shoba’s feelings (71). When she is happy the shelves are full, and the opposite when she is suffering from postpartum depression and her marriage is dissolving. Shukumar’s emotional state, on the other, can be characterized by his food consumption. He consumes Shoba’s food and, in effect, energy, without replenishing it.

There is an endless multitude of interpretations of textual cues in “A Temporary Matter” which provide indeterminate meaning for the reader and which provide uncertainty. However, the use of negatives in the short story is significant as it reveals details that are reportable. From the sentence “It never went to waste”, which is determinately a reference to food, the reader can after subsequent readings read “it” as an ironic reference to Shoba’s potential for child bearing, alternatively Shukumar’s efforts to get married or to buy a home for a small family. Lastly, through the perspective of a reader-response theorist, who sees the act of reading as a way to create meaning it is important to consider Shoba’s act of not reading the dissertation that Shukumar is writing. This scenario strongly indicates that Shoba has let go of their relationship and chooses not to actively create meaning in her husband’s life anymore.

As the reader gets to experience the intermittent shift between certainty and uncertainty, contrast between being able to interpret people and situations, and not being able, creates understanding for people living between two or several cultures and of ourselves, regardless if we identify ourselves as hybrid identities, or not. “A Temporary Matter” by Jhumpa Lahiri is in my opinion a representative and excellent example of how the act of reading can contribute to tolerance and understanding for other people different from ourselves and it
provides me as a teacher with a stronger argument of why reading fiction is important in the classroom. Having closely read this short novel, I feel as I have formed an intimate friendship with the characters Shoba and Shukumar. Even though they are living in a very different cultural context, we share many personal experiences such as the grief connected with the loss of a child. Not only does the text change my perception of people living between Indian and American culture, it changes my perception of myself. This knowledge and understanding is something I carry with me when navigating through life, ultimately an experience filled with certainty and uncertainty.


Skolverket. Curriculum for the compulsory school, preschool class and the recreation centre.


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