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Mourning a Child: Trauma, Gender, and Marital Breakdown in Robert Frost’s “Home Burial” and Jhumpa Lahiri’s “A Temporary Matter”

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Abstract: The loss of a child constitutes one of the most devastating forms of human grief, often disrupting not only individual identity but also the emotional foundations of intimate relationships. This paper examines representations of parental bereavement in Robert Frost’s “Home Burial” and Jhumpa Lahiri’s “A Temporary Matter”, focusing on how child loss produces trauma, gendered responses to mourning, and marital rupture. Drawing on Sigmund Freud’s concepts of mourning and melancholia, Cathy Caruth’s theory of trauma as a belated and “unclaimed” experience, Judith Butler’s framework of gender performativity, and Margaret Stroebe and Henk Schut’s Dual Process Model of coping with bereavement, the study explores how grief functions as both a psychological and relational crisis. In both texts, parents experience the same loss but grieve through overwhelmingly different emotional and behavioural modes, resulting in silence, alienation, and communicative breakdown. While “Home Burial” presents grief as an isolating force that intensifies emotional estrangement and culminates in marital disintegration, “*A Temporary Matter*” offers a more nuanced portrayal in which confession and shared vulnerability create a fleeting moment of mutual recognition. The analysis argues that parental bereavement in literature is not merely a private emotional response but a deeply gendered and traumatic experience that destabilises identity, transforms domestic space, and challenges the possibility of emotional intimacy. Ultimately, the paper demonstrates that the success or failure of a marriage after child loss depends on the parents’ capacity for mutual recognition, the articulation of grief, and compassionate listening to one another.

Keywords- *Child Loss, Parental Grief, Trauma, Gendered Mourning, Marital Breakdown, Emotional Estrangement*

The death of a child represents one of the most profound forms of human loss, destabilising not only individual subjectivity but also relational structures such as marriage. Literature has long portrayed parental bereavement as a grief that exceeds ordinary emotional boundaries. In Act III, Scene IV of Shakespeare’s *King John*, Constance mourns her absent son Arthur in lines that vividly embody the haunting persistence of maternal grief: “Grief fills the room up of my absent child / Lies in his bed, walks up and down with me / Puts on his pretty looks, repeats his words / Remembers me of all his gracious parts / Stuffs out his vacant garments with his form” (47). Here, grief transforms absence into presence, animating memory so intensely that the lost child continues to inhabit domestic space and maternal consciousness. This powerful image anticipates similar representations of parental mourning in later literature, where grief becomes not only an emotional response but a force that reshapes identity, space, and human relationships. Literary representations of parental bereavement often reveal that grief is not a cohesive emotional experience but a fragmented, gendered, and traumatic experience. The child’s parents, both, perceive and process the loss very differently, that might create misjudgements and rifts between them, further leading to the breakdown of the marriage. This paper examines representations of child loss in “A Temporary Matter” and “Home Burial”, arguing that grief in these texts operates as a traumatic and gendered disruption that manifests through silence, arguments, and communicative breakdown.

Drawing on psychoanalytic theory, trauma studies, and gender theory, this paper contends that the breakdown of marital relationships in both texts is not simply due to emotional difference but arises from structurally incompatible modes of grieving, shaped by gendered cultural expectations. The loss of a child disrupts not only parental identity but also marital unity, because mourning is an intensely individual and emotionally demanding process. When parents grieve differently, fail to communicate, or become trapped in melancholia, grief can transform shared love into emotional estrangement and relational rupture.

In “Home Burial”, the mother, Amy, is ‘terrified’ and ‘dull’ (9) at the opening of the poem, looking at her son’s grave and letting her husband look at what she was seeing, “sure that he wouldn’t see, /Blind creature” (15-16). Amy wants to get out of her house to be with someone else, who, unlike her husband, would understand and listen to her. Her husband pleads at first, “Amy! Don’t go to someone else this time” (41) and as the poem ends we see him threatening her, “I’ll follow and bring you back by force. I will!— ” (120). Though their relationship status before their son’s death is unknown, it is quite clear that the child’s death has created a split in the couple, which seems irreparable.

In “A Temporary Matter” the mother, Shoba who had previously been very keen on looking good and had been very particular about the neatness and orderliness of her house, has become “looking, at thirty-three, like the type of woman she’d once claimed she would never resemble” (33). The father, Shukumar has also changed, he has become unwilling to leave the house or work diligently to complete his doctoral thesis, which he is expected to submit soon. The couple has stopped going out, entertaining friends, and has not even celebrated Christmas. Lahiri provides an insight into the happy life of the couple until the tragedy, Shoba “too eager to collapse into his arms” (3). On the surprise party that she had thrown on Shukumar’s birthday, “All night she kept Shukumar’s long fingers linked with hers as they walked among the guests at the party” (8). Shukumar points out how things changed after the child-loss: “he and Shoba had become experts at avoiding each other in their three-bedroom house, spending as much time on separate floors as possible” (5).

Sigmund Freud’s foundational essay *Mourning and Melancholia* (1917) conceptualises grief as a process through which the bereaved gradually detach emotional energy from the lost object. In the essay, Freud introduces two central concepts: mourning and melancholia. Freud distinguishes between mourning as a normal response to loss and melancholia as a more complex, pathological form of grief, both of which offer an important framework for understanding the emotional devastation and relational fractures that follow the loss of a child as portrayed in “Home Burial” and “A Temporary Matter”. Freud describes mourning as a profound psychological state marked by complete emotional absorption in the lost object: “Profound mourning, the reaction to the loss of someone who is loved, contains the same painful frame of mind, the same loss of interest in the outside world... and the same turning away from any activity that is not connected with thoughts of him [her]” (244). This condition of emotional withdrawal is evident in “Home Burial”, where Amy’s grief over the death of her child isolates her entirely from the world around her, including her husband. Her inability to detach herself from the visual and emotional memory of the child’s grave reflects what Freud calls an “exclusive devotion to mourning,” a state in which the ego is so consumed by grief that it has “nothing over for other purposes or other interests” (244). Her husband, however, attempts to process the loss differently, focusing on practical matters and suppressing overt emotional expression. This disparity in mourning styles generates misunderstanding and alienation, demonstrating how grief can paradoxically deepen emotional separation between parents.

Freud also notes that mourning, though painful, is intended to be a temporary process through which the bereaved gradually detach from the lost object and return to life: “The fact is, however, that when the work of mourning is completed the ego becomes free and uninhibited again” (245). Yet literary representations of child loss often reveal the difficulty, or even impossibility, of reaching such closure. In “Home Burial”, Amy remains psychologically trapped in mourning, unable to reconcile her

grief with her husband's seemingly detached response. The grief has affected her so much that she cannot withstand her husband talking of her child's grave, "'Don't, don't, don't, don't,' she cried" (32).

Similarly, in "A Temporary Matter", Shoba and Shukumar remain emotionally suspended after the stillbirth of their baby, unable to communicate openly about their pain. The child's death transforms not only their inner emotional worlds but also the domestic spaces they inhabit, turning home into a site of unbearable memory and emotional rupture. Freud's concept of mourning thus helps illuminate how parental grief can immobilise communication and intimacy, leaving little emotional capacity for mutual consolation.

Freud's distinction between mourning and melancholia becomes especially significant when grief turns inward and begins to affect the mourner's sense of self. He observes, "In mourning it is the world which has become poor and empty; in melancholia it is the ego itself" (246). Unlike mourning, melancholia involves a collapse of self-worth, often accompanied by guilt, self-reproach, and emotional paralysis. Freud explains that when attachment to the lost object cannot be relinquished and this can become self-destructive: "If the love for the object - a love which cannot be given up though the object itself is given up-takes refuge in narcissistic identification, then the hate comes into operation on this substitutive object, abusing it, debasing it, making it suffer and deriving sadistic satisfaction from its suffering" (251). The lost person becomes internalised, and the mourner unconsciously identifies with that loss. This insight is particularly useful for understanding the emotional tensions that emerge between individuals who share grief but process it differently. The inability to mourn together transforms grief into emotional estrangement, illustrating Freud's argument that unresolved attachment can turn suffering inward and make healing impossible.

This dynamic is particularly evident in "A Temporary Matter", where both Shoba and Shukumar internalise their grief differently, carrying the emotional burden in silence and allowing it to reshape their identities and their relationship. In "Home Burial", the resentment between Amy and her husband is intensified because neither can recognise the legitimacy of the other's mourning. Amy interprets her husband's practical approach as emotional insensitivity, while he interprets her overwhelming sorrow as overreaction, "I do think, though, you overdo it a little/ What was it brought you up to think it the thing/To take your mother-loss of a first child/So inconsolably-in the face of love" (66-68). Similarly, in "A Temporary Matter", the silence between Shoba and Shukumar conceals mutual pain and unspoken blame, revealing how grief can erode emotional intimacy. Their inability to communicate reflects how mourning can become transformed into blame, hostility, emotional withdrawal, and marital fragmentation. Freud's notion of melancholia helps illuminate how unresolved

grief may turn not only against the self but also against intimate relationships, damaging the bonds that once provided comfort.

Freud emphasises the painful necessity of accepting reality to come out of the grief: “Reality-testing has shown that the loved object no longer exists, and it proceeds to demand that all libido shall be withdrawn from its attachments to that object” (244). While Amy and Shoba still can't face the reality of the death of their children, Amy terrified of the grave and Shoba tensed over her child's nursery, the men seem to have coped well with reality, because in “Home Burial” the man has dug the grave of his own son, and in “A Temporary Matter” Shukumar has held the dead child in his arms before cremating the baby, thus facing a reality that their wives never could.

Both Frost and Lahiri depict characters who struggle to negotiate this impossible demand of emotional detachment, caught between remembrance and survival. Freud's theories of mourning and melancholia therefore provide a compelling framework for understanding how grief can simultaneously express love, immobilise healing, and fracture relationships. In these literary texts, the loss of a loved one does not merely produce grief, it destabilises identity, transforms domestic intimacy into estrangement, and reveals how deeply mourning can reshape both the self and the bonds between those left behind.

While Sigmund Freud's theory of mourning explains grief as a psychic process of detachment from loss, Cathy Caruth extends this understanding by emphasising trauma's delayed and disruptive nature. In *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (1996), Caruth defines trauma as “the response to an unexpected or overwhelming violent event or events that are not fully grasped as they occur, but return later in repeated flashbacks, nightmares, and other repetitive phenomena” (6). This concept is particularly relevant to child loss, where the emotional impact often exceeds immediate comprehension and resurfaces repeatedly through memory and emotional fragmentation. In Robert Frost's “Home Burial”, Amy remains trapped in the traumatic aftermath of her child's death, unable to move beyond the image of the grave visible from the window. Similarly, in Jhumpa Lahiri's “A Temporary Matter”, Shoba and Shukumar's unresolved grief over their stillborn child manifests in silence, alienation, and emotional withdrawal. Their inability to process the loss at the moment of occurrence demonstrates Caruth's assertion that trauma returns belatedly, haunting individuals long after the event itself.

Caruth's central concept that “trauma is an unclaimed experience” (4) provides an understanding of how bereaved parents struggle to comprehend and articulate the death of a child. According to Caruth, trauma resists direct representation and often remains inaccessible to consciousness, emerging instead through indirect behaviours and emotional ruptures. In “Home

Burial”, Amy’s obsessive fixation on the child’s grave and her inability to communicate her sorrow suggest that her grief has become an “unclaimed” psychic wound—one too painful to integrate into ordinary life. Likewise, in “A Temporary Matter”, Shoba and Shukumar avoid confronting their grief directly, allowing it to fester beneath everyday interactions. Their trauma remains unspoken until the blackouts at night create a temporary space for confession. The loss of the child thus becomes not only a personal tragedy but also an unprocessed traumatic event that destabilises marital intimacy and emotional connection.

Caruth’s insistence on the importance of memory is especially significant in narratives of child loss. She asks, “Why deny the obvious necessity for memory?” (34), suggesting that remembering, however painful, is essential to confronting trauma. Both Frost and Lahiri portray characters who are unable to escape memories of their lost children, illustrating how trauma compels repeated return to the site of grief. In “Home Burial”, the child’s grave functions as a constant visual reminder of Amy’s loss, reinforcing her emotional paralysis. In “A Temporary Matter”, the dismantled nursery and the recollection of the stillborn baby haunt both Shoba and Shukumar, shaping their interactions and deepening their estrangement. These recurring memories demonstrate that forgetting is impossible but that remembrance also becomes a necessary, though agonising, part of mourning. Through Caruth’s lens, memory emerges not merely as recollection but as an essential process through which traumatic loss seeks meaning.

Caruth argues that “the history of trauma is, in a sense, a history of a wound that cries out” (5), emphasising trauma’s urgent need for expression and recognition. Yet in both “Home Burial” and “A Temporary Matter”, the inability to listen to each other’s pain contributes significantly to marital breakdown. Amy longs for emotional understanding from her husband, who cannot fully comprehend her grief, while he seeks practical acceptance and communication. Their inability to realise each other’s suffering intensifies their emotional separation. Similarly, Shoba and Shukumar initially retreat into silence, avoiding the painful reality of their shared loss. It is only during the nightly confessions that they begin to articulate the trauma they have suppressed. However, even this act of speaking ultimately reveals the depth of their estrangement. Caruth’s theory highlights that trauma demands not only expression but also compassionate listening, without mutual witnessing, grief becomes isolating, turning personal sorrow into marital rupture. Lahiri uses the dry ivy plant placed inches away from the tap as a symbol of Shoba and Shukumar’s marriage. Although the possibility of healing and renewal lies close at hand, just as water is near the ivy, their relationship remains emotionally withered until they begin to communicate and share their grief.

Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity offers critical insights into how grief in "Home Burial" and "A Temporary Matter" is shaped by social expectations rather than biological difference. In *Gender Trouble* (1990), Butler argues that "gender is not always constituted coherently or consistently in different historical contexts" (6), emphasising that gender identities are socially produced and historically conditional. This perspective helps explain the contrasting responses to child loss in Robert Frost's "Home Burial". Amy's overt emotional anguish and her husband's practical restraint appear to reflect conventional gender expectations- the mother openly mourns while the father suppresses emotion and focuses on action. However, Butler's theory suggests that these responses are not natural expressions of femininity and masculinity, but culturally learned performances. Jhumpa Lahiri's "A Temporary Matter" subvert these gendered assumptions, as Shoba becomes emotionally distant and restoration-oriented, while Shukumar retreats inward and displays greater emotional vulnerability. These reversals challenge fixed gender binaries and reveal grief as a deeply individual experience rather than shaped by social constructions of gender.

Butler further argues that "gender... is invariably produced and maintained" (6), highlighting how cultural norms continually reinforce expectations of masculine and feminine behaviour. This idea is particularly relevant in examining how society prescribes different modes of mourning for mothers and fathers. Women are often expected to express grief openly and emotionally, while men are encouraged to remain composed, functional, and silent. In "Home Burial", Amy embodies the socially sanctioned role of the grieving mother, expressing her sorrow through tears, withdrawal, and emotional intensity. Her husband, by contrast, attempts to process the loss through practical tasks and emotional restraint, reflecting the masculine expectation of stoicism. In "A Temporary Matter", however, Lahiri subverts these norms. While Shoba distances herself emotionally and seeks order and independence, Shukumar becomes increasingly introspective and emotionally expressive: "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" (4). He has also sought exemption from his teaching duties at the university. After the tragedy, he does the cooking and enjoys it as "the one thing that made him feel productive" (7). Through Butler's lens, these differing responses demonstrate that innately, mourning is not gendered but norms forced by cultural scripts that define how men and women are expected to experience and perform grief.

Butler's assertion that "the political construction of the subject proceeds with certain legitimating and exclusionary aims" (5) helps reveal how identities such as "grieving mother" and "practical father" are socially constructed categories rather than natural truths. Society legitimises certain forms of grief while marginalising others, often granting mothers greater emotional visibility

while denying fathers equal recognition as mourners. In “Home Burial”, Amy’s suffering is central and visibly acknowledged, whereas the husband’s quieter grief is misunderstood and dismissed. His inability to articulate his pain reflects how masculine identities are often constructed in opposition to emotional vulnerability. Similarly, in “A Temporary Matter”, Shukumar’s grief emerges gradually through silence and introspection, challenging the dominant assumption that emotional openness belongs primarily to women. Butler’s theory allows us to see how both maternal and paternal grief are shaped by social expectations that regulate mourning and label it as normal/abnormal. Child loss thus becomes not only an emotional crisis but also a site where gender identities are reinforced and contested.

One of Butler’s most significant insights is her claim that “if one ‘is’ a woman, that is surely not all one is” (6), a statement that is particularly relevant in understanding how child loss destabilises female identity. Both Amy and Shoba are mothers, but their identities cannot be reduced solely to motherhood. The death of a child profoundly disrupts not only their maternal roles but also their broader sense of self, exposing the fragility of socially defined womanhood. Amy’s inability to move beyond grief reflects a crisis of identity, as motherhood remains central to her emotional existence even after the child’s death. In contrast, Shoba attempts to reconstruct her life through emotional detachment and independence, suggesting a struggle to redefine herself beyond the loss. Butler’s theory underscores that womanhood is not a fixed or singular identity but a complex and shifting construct. Through this lens, both texts reveal how child loss fractures personal identity and forces women to renegotiate their sense of self beyond socially imposed maternal expectations.

Margaret Stroebe and Henk Schut’s work on bereavement offers a crucial psychological perspective on understanding gendered responses to child loss in “Home Burial” and “A Temporary Matter”. In their essay, “The Dual Process Model of Coping with Bereavement: Rationale and Description”, they observe that “evidence has shown bereaved mothers to be more loss oriented than fathers, following the death of their child” (218), suggesting that mothers are often more immersed in emotional confrontation with loss, while fathers tend to focus on restoration and practical adjustment, which can also be seen as a conditioned gendered behaviour. This distinction is clearly visible in Robert Frost’s “Home Burial”, where Amy remains intensely loss-oriented, emotionally fixated on her child’s grave and unable to move beyond the trauma, while her husband adopts a more restoration-oriented approach, returning to daily responsibilities and attempting to manage grief through routine. Stroebe and Schut further note that “female respondents gave first place to ‘Sharing feelings and emotions,’ while this ranked tenth among male respondents, who ranked ‘Learning how others solve problems like mine’ as first” (219). This difference explains Amy’s desperate need for emotional acknowledgment and her husband’s practical, problem-solving behaviour, which she interprets as

emotional coldness. In “A Temporary Matter”, however, Lahiri complicates this traditional pattern: Shoba becomes restoration-oriented, immersing herself in work and emotional distance, while Shukumar remains emotionally suspended in grief, revealing that these responses are shaped not solely by biological sex but by individual coping mechanisms.

Stroebe and Schut also argue that “if a mother’s grief over the loss of a child is more loss-oriented, a father’s more restoration-oriented, this discordance in ways of coping may, at times, be mutually uncondusive” (219). This insight directly explains the marital breakdown in “Home Burial”, where Amy and her husband are not grieving unequally but differently. Amy interprets her husband’s calm demeanour and practical behaviour, particularly his act of digging their child’s grave, as evidence of emotional indifference, while he views her prolonged mourning as excessive and isolating. Their inability to recognise each other’s coping styles turns grief into conflict and emotional estrangement. Similarly, in “A Temporary Matter”, Shoba and Shukumar’s marriage deteriorates because their differing responses to child loss create silence and distance rather than mutual support. Shoba withdraws into professional life and plans separation, while Shukumar retreats into passivity and private sorrow. In both texts, the inability to accommodate differing modes of mourning transforms personal grief into marital rupture, illustrating how discordant grieving can become “mutually uncondusive” to healing and intimacy.

One of Stroebe and Schut’s most significant observations is that “it would be easy for a mother to make the attribution that ‘He is grieving less than I am’ rather than... ‘He is grieving differently from the way I am’” (219). This misunderstanding lies at the heart of both literary relationships. In “Home Burial”, Amy assumes that because her husband continues his routine and speaks normally, he does not feel the loss deeply, failing to recognise that his grief is expressed differently rather than absent. Amy says, “If you had any feelings, you that dug /With your own hand-how could you? - his little grave” (76-77). She further says, “You could sit there with the stains on your shoes/Of the fresh earth from your own baby’s grave/And talk about your everyday concerns” (87-90). Likewise, in “A Temporary Matter”, Shoba appears to interpret Shukumar’s emotional withdrawal as passivity, while his final confession that he had seen and held their dead child, reveals the depth of his silent suffering. Stroebe and Schut also emphasise that “confrontation with the reality of loss is the essence of adaptive grieving. It needs to be done, but not relentlessly” (220), suggesting that healthy mourning requires a balance between emotional engagement and restoration. Neither Amy nor her husband achieves this balance, as Amy remains trapped in grief while her husband may avoid it through routine. In contrast, Lahiri offers a more nuanced ending, where the blackouts create a temporary space for shared confrontation and emotional release, as Shoba and Shukumar “wept together” (22). They momentarily

achieve a form of mutual recognition, demonstrating that healing begins when grief is acknowledged together rather than judged separately.

The paper demonstrates that the success or failure of a marriage after child loss depends on the parents' capacity for mutual recognition, the articulation of grief, and compassionate listening to one another. While Frost's "Home Burial" presents bereavement as an isolating force that culminates in irrevocable separation, Lahiri's "A Temporary Matter" offers a more ambivalent vision, suggesting that even when reconciliation is impossible, the act of articulating grief may create a fragile moment of emotional recognition. By bringing together psychoanalytic, trauma, and gender-based perspectives, this study demonstrates that parental bereavement in literature is not merely a private emotional experience but a profound relational and social crisis that reshapes identity, intimacy, and the very possibility of human connection.

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