

# Class Consciousness in the Novel *The Space Between Us* by Thrity Umrigar

Dr. S. Mary Sophia Rani\*<sup>1</sup>

Kadapa, India

## Abstract-

“Her presence was slight, and went unnoticed. But when illness or indisposition kept her away, she was seen everywhere; in the dirty cups and saucers, upon the dusty furniture, in the sheets of unmade beds.” (Mistry 64)

The above statement tells about the toil of a housemaid in a family. Her sense of sacrifice and suffering for the welfare of the family deserves all appreciation and her role is pivotal. But she remains a victim of age-old subjugation. The writers of the South Asian fiction probe the different aspects of domestic servants. The problems that confront middle class family servants are illiteracy, protectorate, obligation, rapport and aging. Like other Asian writers Thrity Umrigar also touches the issues of domestic servants in her second novel *The Space Between Us* (2006). It is about the relationship between employer and servant. In her debut novel, *Bombay Time* (2001) she focuses on the Parsi Indian middle-class families within an apartment, where all the residents are Parsis and their disparate memories, experiences of disappointments, shattered dreams, betrayals, pangs of separation by death and regret due to wrong decisions. Brad Watson, author of *The Heaven of Mercury*, reviewed and labeled her work as ‘bitter sweet novel’. Whereas in this novel *The Space Between Us*, she shifts her focus on gender, class and how they play a dominant role between the lives of two women.

Index Terms- Class Consciousness, domestic servants, illiteracy, shattered dreams and betrayals.

## INTRODUCTION

The novel *The Space Between Us* is about the relationship between two women, in fact it is a relationship between an employer and a maid whose intimacy gradually increased and ran smoothly for some time until these women have recognized their status. The most important factor which portrays a woman’s destiny, her survival and her fate is clearly portrayed by the author. In a conversation with Thrity Umrigar in the Post Script of the novel, she stated that “it is impossible to have two human beings work and live in a contained domestic space all day long and not form some kind of a bond or human connection” (P.S. 7).

The two protagonists of this novel Sera Dubash, a Parsi woman of upper middle class family and Bhima the domestic servant of Dubash family, who has been working for decades. The novel is author’s mouth piece, powerful, creative and evocative. Umrigar portraying the pain, pleasure, suffering, memories of flashback and the bond between these two women. Both belong to different classes. Their class division is dependent upon certain modes of lifestyle, attitude and behaviour. There are different ways of marginalization in which Sera and Bhima are treated in their respective classes. They have few choices in their individual roles and are entrapped in the inescapable cage of the “woman-wife-mother.” In their journey of life, both Sera and Bhima follow the particular class pattern where power and wealth play a significant role and the family honour and welfare are the primary concern. This class division never allows them to cross their boundaries and they remain trapped in the clutches of traditions and manners of their familial position.

These two women, Bhima and Sera experience similar situations in their lives; death, abuse or absence of husband enduring shame and disappointment, their love for their children and hope for their future. The only element that separate them is class. The two women pull on at opposite ends at the socio-economic spectrum of Bombay city.

Sera was brought up in an independent environment of Bombay. Being a single daughter of scientist, she enjoyed an extraordinary position in her paternal home. An educated and self-sustained woman, Sera was treated as an individual and the woman of self-respect. Her liberal upbringing and education provide her the option of selecting her spouse independently. Anjana Sen Gupta in her book *Women on the Move* asserts;

“Her self-choice marriage is expected to provide opportunities for intellectual growth, intimacy in relationship, a sense of companionship and opportunity for self-expressions” (Sengupta 23).

Sera is portrayed as an acquiescent character, who never raised her voice against her husband. A modern and well educated Sera learnt to obey and compromise to all hurdles in her life. Gradually, she understands her place in Feroz’s home as that of an ‘unpaid servant.’ She compromises with and adjusts to her marginalized status in the home. The repeated abuse that Sera has suffered in love makes her so vulnerable that she feels empty as a woman. The emptiness of Sera’s marital relation makes her crave for motherhood. Motherhood offers familial and social compensation to Sera. Dinaz’s birth not only gives her a chance to experience the joy of childbirth and nurture but it also furnishes her with a sense of accomplishment and belonging that is observed by Nancy Friday;

“When one woman gives birth to another, to someone like her, they are linked together for life in a special way”. (Friday 39)

Sera’s misery is distinctly witnessed by Bhima, the maid of Dubash family, who lives in the slum of Mumbai. She uses some natural herbs to heal the stain of Feroz’s violation. “Sera remembers the blow and the balm; the tormentor and the healer: Feroz and Bhima”. The way he acts with his wife depends on his mother. Banu, who is interloper of Sera’s life. Her action is like a spy or an informer. She always has a lidless eye on her daughter-in-law’s every movement in the house and tells Feroz every day when he returns from office. The only bliss Sera has in her life is her daughter Dinaz. She always thinks about her daughter that;

“She is the only bright spot in my life anymore, she thought..... The rest of them- Feroz and his mother- they have ruined her life.” (184)

The only person in Sera’s life, who knew that her husband’s abuses occasionally flew like ‘black vultures’ over the desert of her body is her maid, friend and well-wisher Bhima. She knew more about the strangeness of her marriage than any family member of friends. Though she is illiterate and servant, she advises Sera about Feroz’s cruelty.

Bhima, a sixty-five years old, a slum dweller, who is wrinkled and scooped out, a sign of her abject poverty, who is illiterate and stoic, a sign of the sub-culture of poverty she was born into, and who struggles to live with the company of Maya, her orphaned granddaughter, in a mud-floored squalid slum by working as a housemaid for Sera on a daily routine.

Bhima is an illiterate and stoic became a sign of wretched poverty. There is no scale for Bhima’s pain, there is no hope for Maya’s future, and their lives are deceived, subjugated, exploited, oppressed and blamed. Bhima and Maya live in a mud floored squalid slum, her routine job starts every morning leaving her small shanty in the ghetto to tend Sera Dubash’s home. The novel is set on a passive height. Bhima whose story begins and ends in the novel, is a spokesperson of that wide support system of workers without whom most middle class households of India would collapse; individuals who touched upon the lives of their privileged employers intimately but themselves remain peripheral and insignificant entities in any deeper and meaningful sense in those lives.

Bhima is also proud mother of two children, Amit and Pooja. All is well till her husband is maimed in an industrial accident and the factory administration refuses to own responsibility for the accident and pay compensation. The accountant of the factory visits their home and takes Bhima’s signature on a blank paper, which later used to deny any benefits to Gopal. The official plays tricks with marginalized people, withholding the truth from them and conspiring with the rich to defraud the couple. He takes advantage of their trust and lack of education and negotiates to safeguard the interests of the owners. This incident becomes the main cause of their suffering and Gopal gradually slips into alcoholism. Gopal accused Bhima of accountant treachery:

“Everything else has been taken from me, Bhima- my hands, my employment, my pride. Please don’t take one thing away from me. I’m not like those other drunken fools. I know when to stop”. (234)

One day Gopal absconds with their only son Amit and Bhima to meet the challenges of the world. He had struck her like a viper and moreover he had stolen the brightest and shiniest object in her life (their son Amit). He left Bhima and Pooja as ‘an abandoned pair of shoes.’ (147) She brings up her daughter Pooja and arranges her marriage to Raju. After the wedding Pooja leaves for Delhi with her husband but the mother-daughter relation is sustained beyond the constraints of place. All this while, Bhima says busy with

her daily routine in the Dubash household, then catastrophe strikes when Raju and Pooja are diagnosed with AIDS. Pooja has contracted the dreaded disease from her husband. The knowledge devastates the young couple. As an illiterate Bhima said:

And after this second funeral, after Pooja turns into ashes before my cursed eyes, after I have witnessed the horror of my own child dying before me, I will want to melt like ice, I will want to crumble like sand, I will want to dissolve like sugar in a glass of water. I will want to stop existing. (147)

Bhima is a grandmother and she raises Maya affectionately with the support of Sera who takes the responsibility to provide her a good education. Maya's admission into a school and the prospects of a bright future are like miracles to Bhima. She believes that her degree would get them out of an autocratic Bombay slums, guaranteeing Maya a better life away from servitude. Sera and Bhima's experiences as mothers and grandmother thus, provide them diverse experiences of identity, power, happiness, suffering and pain. The pain in Bhima's words:

Once I had two children, and now I will have none. One dead, the other disappeared, vanished, stolen from me by my cockroach of a husband. And a mother without children is not a mother at all, and if I am not a mother, then I am nothing. Nothing. I am like a sugar dissolved in a glass of water. Or, I am like salt, which disappears when you cook with it. I am salt. Without my children, I cease to exist. (147)

Sera never noticed Bhima appearing old, exhausted and diffident. Not even when Gopal had left and he takes with him the most precious thing (her son Amit) in her life. She had been scared then, no question about that situations, but she knew she was still responsible for Pooja, and that responsibility towards her daughter had strengthened and kept her from falling apart. Sera said; "No, Gopal may have broken Bhima's back, but Maya had broken her spirit (43)".

Maya is the only granddaughter of Bhima, she rescued her from death's door and promised to Pooja to look after Maya. Bhima lost everything in her life. Maya is the only bright spot in her life; who had come to her as an orphan and grown up to be a brilliant and aspiring young girl; she is the only flesh and blood family member she still had near her.

Such a bright and brilliant girl, Maya becoming a mother at seventeen, which ruins her bright future. She refuses when Bhima mentioned about abortion. Maya was the only first person in Bhima's family to attend college. The bright path that raised before Maya. She does not reveal the father of unborn baby who had brought so much worry into their lives. Bhima thinks about her granddaughter that she is just a silly and immature girl, she has no idea how the pit of fate would swallow her up if she went ahead and without a father to support her would spoil her life.

The situation is aggravated when Maya declines unfathomably to reveal the identity of the man. To avoid social disgrace, it seems necessary to Sera and Bhima that Maya should abort. For, it is not possible to take either responsibility. Bhima is completely shattered at this turn of events and now it is Sera who assumes the position of the supporter. Sera and Bhima seek to find the father of the unborn child but they fail. In these circumstances, the intimacy between Sera and Bhima takes the shape of a sisterhood where both the servant negotiates in their equal capacity as women and try to make a protective nest for Maya.

Bhima plays an important role in Dubash family, but what happens in their 'dichotomous and cherished relationship' is that when Bhima is encountered the truth of Maya's pregnancy, Sera is found guilty as her own son-in-law is the cause of Maya's unborn baby. Though Sera knew Bhima is truthful because of their previous acquaintance still Sera could not stand by Bhima's side. Sera opted to save her daughter Dinaz marital life by supporting Viraf. Sera is not willing to put her daughter's life into risk by standing on the side of truth and prioritising the rapport which Sera had built all these years. Through this situation one can come to know that the subject of marriage or marital life of a girl is given a highest place in society and it has a strong impact on woman, where people got tuned that marital life is the only prospect for a woman and if no marriage takes place for a woman she is considered as ill fated, scorned, misunderstood and questioned by society.

Apart from friendship, Thrity Umrigar highlighted the subjugation of poor, the power suppressing the powerless. Because Bhima is poor, she is not able to sue against Viraf nor does she have the strength to go against Sera's family.

When Sera shifts to her new home and Bhima undertakes to work at Sera's new home in addition to working at the Dubash household. Bhima appreciate that Sera and Dinaz treat her as a person, overlooking the fact that she is needed to eat separately and using different crockery from the family. Sera and Bhima conscious of the class difference between them and they accept their different lots in life with the nonchalance founded on the acceptance of tradition. The class-supremacy and its impact on individuals is noticeable and false class consciousness is followed by a full awareness of the true situation and of understanding the nature of their position. Bhima cannot sit on the furniture which she cleans every day and Sera upholds this class disparity as even the thought of Bhima sitting on their furniture repulses Sera. She cannot to see Dinaz embracing Bhima and she has to, "suppress the urge to order her daughter to go and wash her hands (29)". Though Sera calls Bhima, "my Bhima", and talks about her proprietarily (19)". Sera sits on a chair at the table while Bhima squats on her haunches on the floor nearby. On the other hand, she cannot but admire Bhima for her conduct and character and when one of her neighbours states that, "Sera is rewarded in heaven for the way she treats Bhima" she replies wryly, "heaven has nothing to do it, Bhima is a decent person and a good worker." (44) However the conditioning of the rigid social structure keeps them apart in the sphere beyond that of the mistress-servant. She has never visited Bhima's house which is located less than a fifteen minutes walk away. She bridges the gap fleetingly only once on the day when Bhima is unwell. On entering Bhima's home she feels as, "If she had entered another universe." (113) And wants to run away from that place and escape back to her sanity house.

The relationship between these women in many ways highlights the space between them which is concretized by the material difference at their homes-one a rich apartment and the other a small room in a slum. Swapna Krishna in a review of *The Space Between Us* states;

"The reader hopes that Sera will reach out to Bhima and try to connect with her on their common ground because they really could help one another. But unfortunately, that isn't the way that class works". (Krishna)

With the experience of earlier betrayals, Bhima is immediately able to deduce that it is Viraf who is responsible for their misery and pain. She notices that he tries to hide behind his wife and mother-in-law. She recollects how he treated Maya playfully without any class difference and now he is the man who ruptures the lives of her and her granddaughter. He pushed the blame for their indiscretion upon Maya alone. Here again patriarchy plays a vital role as he uses his machismo and cunning to safeguard his position by undermining Maya's;

"listen, Maya, he said softly. I was thinking...thinking about what...just happened, about what you did. Yes, that was a bad thing you did, tempting me like that, taking advantage of me while I was in a weak mood". (279)

Now he clearly uses different tools of negotiation-intrigue and threats, to protect himself and his reputation. He relegates Maya to the position of the temptress and the sub-servient. Taking full advantage of patriarchy, "a system of social structure and practices in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women," he cheats Maya and Bhima and Dinaz and Sera equally. (Walby 142)

Bhima's silence, her surly behaviour towards Viraf and her refusal to speak to him threaten him and provoke a negative response from him because he is aware that Bhima knows the reality and she holds the power to save or ruin his life. In psychological terms human beings feel two types of threats in their life which are elucidated by Paul Gilbert as "external and internal". External threats are threats that are perceived to lie outside of the self. Internal threats relate to the emergence of internal experiences that negatively impact on "self-evaluations, self-identity and self-presentation" (14). He is clearly vulnerable to both threats. To hide his misdeeds and self-protection, he uses negative negotiation and cunningly sets a trap for Bhima. He falsely tells Sera that Bhima has stolen seven hundred rupees from his cupboard. Bhima is completely shocked at his statement and she realizes that he must have planned it for weeks. She retaliates angrily, "I'll tell the story about your evil, how you ruined my family's reputation, how you stained my family's honour. Just open your mouth to the police, and I'll show you what I'm made of, you dirty dog" (301). Sera is shocked and confused at this development of Bhima. She is not able to understand the situation and her inner voice which gives her support and encouragement on many occasions fails to guide her at this critical moment. So she silently she sits on the sofa with a stricken look on her face.

As the situation builds to a crucial breakpoint, under relational obligations Sera is not able to show her resentment directly to Viraf, but it spontaneously appears in relation to Bhima when she calls Viraf a dog. She bursts out authoritatively, like a mistress not a friend, and tells Bhima, “control yourself have gone mad, talking in this low class way? don’t forget who you’re talking to” (301)

It is manifest at this juncture that class-consciousness again seems to play a vital role as Sera fails to negotiate beyond class boundaries and acts solely to protect her family and its honour. On the other hand, her action can also be explicated in line with the psychological effects of her dependency of Viraf and her only daughter Dinaz. This dependence leads to lack of self-esteem, lack of confidence, and the inability to take decisions. Sera turns towards Viraf inquiringly to know the truth from him even as Bhima expects Sera to take her side.

As a matter of fact, Sera clearly realizes that Viraf is lying. She recognizes that lines of hierarchy and kinship are clearly drawn between her and Bhima. They now shape their complex relationship. Sera seems to consciously choose conduct aimed at creating and maintaining family harmony. However, at a deeper level it is a mother’s protective instinct for her daughter that is driving her. Her reference to Dinaz is an oblique way of explaining that her behaviour is goaded by her concern for the wellbeing of her daughter.

Here Sera uses her class power to marginalize Bhima to protect her daughter’s life but in her rage Bhima only perceives it as a dastardly betrayal. To her Sera appears to choose family over friendship and class over sisterhood. Sera has to sacrifice Bhima to protect Dinaz and orders Bhima out from her life and from her home with the cryptic remark “Get out of my sight” (303). At these words of Sera, Bhima hears the resentment in her voice and she aware of the whole situation. But she notices the film of sweat on his face and a look of satisfaction and victory towards her. Sera’s action is painful for both Sera and Bhima and both are victims of Viraf’s villainy. Sera loses a friend and confidante and Bhima is bereft of Sera’s emotional, physical and psychological support. Natasha Mann comments;

For more than twenty years they have lived through each other’s pains and losses, and have been subject to secrets hidden even from their relatives, so that they have become bound by- if not friendship –then kindness, compassion and intimate knowledge. Only when a crisis occurs are they forced to choose their true allegiances (Mann)

Therefore, the long bonding between Sera and Bhima is overcome by Sera’s maternal instinct for Dinaz. In this situation Bhima’s silence about the seduction and abuse of Maya speaks volumes about her attachment to Sera. The difference in the choices they make opens a yawning space between them. Finally, Sera choose to save her daughter’s life and she believe her son-in-law’s “obvious lie” over Bhima’s “obvious truth”. (311) Ligaya Mishan observes in her review:

In the classic upstairs-downstairs story, you always have a sneaking suspicion that downstairs, freed of corsets and etiquette, the servants are having a lot more fun than their prim, monocle maters. But no such palliative exists in the world of Thrity Umrigar’s second novel, which examines the class divide... through the relationship of mistress and her servant. ([http:// www.umrigar.com/space between.html](http://www.umrigar.com/space-between.html))

Henceforth, Sera and Bhima move in opposite directions; Sera moves inward to her family and home whereas Bhima steps out to an uncertain future. In the process of marginalization between man and woman and between woman and woman, Sera is cast in the image of a woman who is inward and diffident. She is willing to sacrifice her relationship with Bhima for the sake of peace and family relations. Thus, the seeds of marginalization produce the ‘class war’ where both Sera and Bhima are still form an ideal, democratic and liberated model of life where they have their own say in their particular position. Umrigar’s compassionate understanding of realities does not propel her to stretch her imagination towards the scope of proposing any mode of activism within her narratology.

At the end of the novel, it is Bhima who stands apart for her extraordinary strength and human resilience to withstand the terrible odds and pleasures when everything seems to be lost in a world like that of urbanized Mumbai where anonymity seems to be the hallmark of the poor of India. In contemporary India, there are innumerable Bhima who, as domestic servant, continue to scrub and clean the houses of Sera’s but cannot claim equality of fellowship, if not status. This is one of the modern travesties and tragedies of India.

There are many women like Sera, Bhima, Dinaz and Maya. The lives of these four women are ruined because of one man Viraf. In the roles of mothers Sera and Bhima want to save their daughters marital lives. In the course of saving her Dinaz's life sera sacrificing her life time companion Bhima. Feminist critic Uma Chakravathy rightly remarks:

“Class divides women. It extraordinarily succeeds in dividing women, in erasing a possibility of sisterhood. Such sisterhood can emerge only when we eliminate class and caste”. (271)

This oppression of woman is not being tried to be understood or is purportedly connived at because women hold social security for their children and themselves before their individuality and try to avoid the social stigma of being marked as an abandoned woman. This weak point has given strength to patriarchal male dominance which is universally present.

To explore this class difference Umrigar briefly skims the concept of the subaltern. Bhima is a member of the subaltern class that labours in order to survive. In the polemics of heterogeneity, Gayatri Spivak includes: “the oppressed subject” and “the people of inferior rank.” Notwithstanding the consciousness of class distinction, Sera and Bhima are able to negotiate around it to forge and sustain a strong bonding. In their relationship there is no need even of a verbal exchange and they share an “unspoken language, this intimacy that has developed between them over the years.” (17) Sera helps Maya to pursue higher education and she takes the initiative to enroll her in college. Maya is also attached to Sera and several times comes to work for the Dubash family, particularly in the absence of her grandmother. In this all-women world Sera, Dinaz, Bhima, and Maya follow as easy rhythm from which Feroz is excluded. When Bhima's husband Gopal was admitted in the hospital, Sera and Feroz visited and enquired with the hospital staff and which compelled them to administer a new dose of anti-biotic to Gopal which helped him immensely for his speedy recovery. The power of education, wealth, position and of courses his Parsi heritage all are reflected in his high-handed attitude.

“I work for the TATA's, you understand? Do you know what pull we have with the hospital administration? One word from me and you will be out on the streets with you. And what's more I will make bloody sure not one other hospital in Bombay hires you (218)”.

Bhima who was a witness to all this first that the air of confidence and power which Feroz Seth possessed, which made even the doctor in rubber slippers bow down in servility, was due to education. But later she realized that it was the easy grace and elegance which most Parsis possessed which prompted others to follow their order like meek lambs. Bhima both perplexed and happy wonders.

Sera understand Bhima's moods and she even appreciates Bhima's silence as there a lot is conveyed through Bhima's quiet gestures. Both share a very good bonding so good that even Sera had given half of her place to Bhima in her heart. Though Sera is well aware of the fact that Bhima maintained a decent sense of hygiene compared to other maids who lived in the near-by slums she is totally repulsed by her daughter's closeness to Bhima. In fact ever since Sera had known Bhima, she was quite aware of the fact that Bhima took a fifteen minute break at 4.00 p.m to tidy herself. “Her daily ministrations compelled Sera, who then became aware of her own-sour-smelling body, to stop whatever she was doing and freshen up”. (29)

In fact, Bhima had been Sera's only companion at times when she was shaken up by the physical abuse meted out by her husband Feroz and soul-wrenching humiliation inflicted by Banu, her mother-in-law. Another reason as to why Bhima though a confidant of Sera is kept at a distance was that Sera had rarely come across such close master-servant behavior pattern in her own parental house or society in which she mingled.

The same attitude or behaviour which Sera have towards Bhima can be seen practiced by many upper caste Hindus especially among the Brahmin community. Even though the members might be highly educated and technology savvy many of them still keep servants at a bay and separate utensils are maintained for the use of the servant.

Dinaz presents a total resistance and challenge to the class consciousness by wholeheartedly accepting Bhima as an elderly mother-figure whom she adores. Though both parents are apprehensive about Dinaz's strange fascination to Bhima they keep quiet for the fear that Dinaz will openly blurt out and accuse of practicing caste-prejudice like that the Brahmin community. She always tells to her mother;

“You tell all your friends that Bhima is like a family member, that you couldn't live without her”. (27)

And Dinaz accused her parents' discrimination towards Bhima. The women from the lower class are often stereotyped as attempting to hook men using their wily charms. It is because of the interiorisation of this stereotype that Sera in 'The Space between Us' refuses to believe Bhima when the latter blurts out the truth that it was Sera's son-in-law, Viraf who had raped Maya. In spite of several pleas by Bhima that Maya is innocent, Sera throws out Bhima out of her house. In case of any problem in which people from two opposite classes are involved, it is always the people from the lower class who are blamed, deemed guilty and left to suffer the consequences. Sera too blame Maya and redeem her son-in-law from the accusations. She insults Maya;

"What your Maya did is her business... She can be whore with fifty men for all I care. Just don't involve my family in her sickness. I've done all I could for that girl. Now I wash my hands of the whole family... get out of my sight". (303)

Bhima is not scared about losing her employment in Sera's house. Bhima did not gave up she went up to Sera to ask justice for her Maya's innocence. Through Sera and Bhima, one can see that in a tradition bound country like India, marriage, family and a girl's chastity becomes a primary aspect for a woman. Sera was stand on Viraf's side by pushing all the blame on Maya. But, she will never forget the words of Bhima and that words caw in her ears like crows and distress her in the sweaty and sleepless nights. Moreover, she ever be able to look at her only daughter's innocent, laughing face again and not think of Viraf's deceit.

The novel pulls on at opposite ends at the socio-economic spectrum of Mumbai city. The lasting impact the novel upon the reader's psyche is the way this two characters-one a victim of human cruelty, and the other, a victim of poverty and marginalization, survive the onslaught of a male dominated world and the condescendingly gossiping world of men and women with strength and fortitude. The way Umrigar juxtaposes contradictory thoughts, realities, and emotions is scintillating and soul-impacting, ushering in a compunctious catharsis. The title of the novel is so apt that it speaks of the spaces that ensure affinities and spaces that create distances vis-à-vis different relationships among characters in the novel. The soul-mate affinities of the space between Sera and Bhima are limitless but the cultural and class distances of the space between them are governed by Sera's background of birth, wealth, and status. Bhima is more an object of Sera's benediction and benefaction though she, as a subject, gives a valuable emotional support to Sera in the context of the predicament she lives with. Though the kindness Sera extends towards the wellbeing of Bhima and Maya has some therapeutic effect, to treat Bhima as an equal is an unacceptable proposition to Sera because of her 'upper-middle-class skin'. Sera even admires the way Dinaz appreciate Bhima but she has also the temerity to chide and caution her daughter against her rapport with Bhima. Thus, Umrigar imagined India is a reflection of the trajectory of class discrimination between the privileged and powerful and the poor and literature. Told from the point of view of the old woman, the story tellingly portrays the vicious circle in which the poor like Bhima are caught.

What makes Sera be kind to Bhima? Is it the experience of innumerable humiliations she had to undergo under her abusive husband and cruel mother-in-law then, or is it a sign of her moral and spiritual solidarity with the cause of the poor and marginalized? The answer is obviously the first one as the novelist implies. The bond of gender relationship both sera and Bhima maintain have their source of strength in their awareness of the crushing conjugal disappointments both of them have to endure. Sera is not capable of opting for a revolutionary step which would enable her to treat Bhima as an equal. Her bond of womanhood or feminine psyche does not transcend or eliminate the man-made barriers such as engendered poverty and deep-rooted class disparities India is destined to endure despite the progress achieved on several counts. This is why she is a more a type than an individual. Therefore, the poor are bound to be there everywhere and at all times-now and times to come, because of the citizenry in general believe, as Sera does, in certain constricting boundaries that perpetuate class considerations. The lyrical touch with which the novelist handles emotions of the central characters, the tragic beauty connoted by her narrative art, and the feminine psyche of the novelist enlightened by life-experiences in contemporary India contribute to the richness and the variety of new canonical trends set by women writers in India's post-nationalist modern literature.

Umrigar imagined Bhima is both an individual and type, and the real Bhima is known to the novelist by virtue of her childhood and teenage upbringing in Mumbai. In one of her radio conversations, Umrigar speaks of her hopes that one day she would meet her real Bhima, perhaps the one who worked for her house when she was living in India, but who is no more within the vicinity of her family apartment in Mumbai. The novel is aptly dedicated to the real Bhima and the millions like Bhima, critics have noticed similarities

of perception in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, Maya Angelou's *I know why the Caged Bird Sings*, Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner*, and Rupa Bajwa's *The Sari Shop* but the blunt realism and compassionate aesthetics with which Umrigar presents the contemporary India through personal stories is uniquely Parsi-Indian. In Umrigar's words about Bhima:

"I loved Bhima, because I had just declared myself a Socialist and Bhima was my own private laboratory, my personal experiment, on whom to try out my newly discovered theories of social justice and the proletariat and the revolution". (P.S Umrigar)

Thus this novel is about women's strength, identity, survival, poverty, education, family and gender role are all explored. "It is dark, but inside Bhima's heart it is Dawn."(312). Thrity Umrigar projected Bhima as a woman of strong character who in spite of poverty and low status did not hesitate to fight for her granddaughter's cause at the cost of losing her livelihood and straining the long standing relationship between her mistress and her. At the end of the novel Bhima stands apart an extraordinary strength and human resilience to withstand the terrible odds and pressures when everything seems to be lost in the world.

Gender and the division of class, it is a theme that has interested me- haunted me, even- for as long as I can remember. One of the reasons I have always loved Bombay is because it is a city riddled with contradictions and paradox. In an apartment in a small corner of the city, I grew up experiencing a microcosm of this larger paradox- this strange tug-of-war between intimacy and unfamiliarity; between awareness and blindness. (<http://www.umrigar.com/space-between.html>)

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