

DUSK TO DAWN: A FEMINIST STUDY OF *THE SPACE BETWEEN US***SHRUTI JAIN**PhD Research Scholar, Department of English and Foreign Languages
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ABSTRACT: *Thrity Umrigar lives in Ohio yet has depicted the plight of Indian women in patriarchal hegemonic society as grounded in her psyche. This paper discusses the lives of two women who try to fit in the stifling circumstances as advised to them by oppressive society but eventually on facing tribulations take different courses. On one hand is Sera, an upper middle class woman who remains subservient and thus sacrifices her personality and her existence fades into oblivion and on the other is Bhima, a triply marginalized because of her class, caste and gender, breaks the traditional notions of women passed on to generations and carves a new standard for women to emulate.*

KEY WORDS: *Marginalization, Suffering, Loss of identity, Self Consciousness, Reworking, New carvings*

INTRODUCTION

The Space Between Us (2006) by Thrity Umrigar is a story of two women, Sera Dubash, an upper-middle-class educated Parsi housewife and Bhima, illiterate but a hard working maid. Sera and Bhima belong to different classes and castes yet they have something common in their lives, that is, endless suffering. They both are leading a meaningless life and searching for peace and harmony. In fact confined both mentally and physically by gender, familial and social ideologies, they serve as a reigning image of innumerable Indian women.

STUDY

The opening sentence of the novel elucidates the evident and symbolic suffocation which an Indian woman feels in an arrogant and orthodox Indian society: “Although it is dawn, inside Bhima’s heart it is dusk” (5). Bhima is a poor low caste woman who is abandoned by her husband and lives with her granddaughter Maya in a small hut of a slum colony. Maya is pregnant but Bhima is terrified of revealing it because the former has committed the crime of

conceiving without marriage. Bhima's fear is that of a typical Indian grandmother reared in an oppressive male dominated society. She is concerned about Maya's future and thus afraid of the consequences. She does not want anyone to know about Maya's condition as she knows that if someone does a much greater trauma will be at hand for her and her granddaughter. The taboo of chastity occupies such a chief importance in Indian patriarchal society that once woman lose it she has no right to live in the society, despite the fact that it is men responsible for her plight: "Bhima pulls the door shut behind her. She wants to slam it but controls herself. No need for anyone in the basti to know their family problems. They will know about the disgrace Maya has brought upon herself soon enough, and then they will attack her like vultures" (12).

Bhima thinking about all this is already in an aggrieved state yet Maya adds to her troubles by refusing to disclose the name of the father of her unborn child. Bhima is so overcome by agony, anger, helplessness and fear that she oscillates between two extremes, sometimes she curses Maya putting all the blame on her; and soon yearns to shower her maternal love on her. The one person who knows about this traumatic state of Bhima and shares her pain is her mistress Sera. From more than twenty years Bhima has been working in Dubash household. However, the irony is that Sera's dead husband, Feroz actually had never considered Sera anything more than his mistress. Though it was he who had proposed and seduced her into marriage yet subjected her to insults and abuses. Feroz and his mother Banu had intelligently trapped Sera into the net of marriage in order to murder her individuality. They always expected her to submit. Soon after her marriage she came to know that Feroz had lied to her. He had cheated her by not disclosing about Gulnaz, his ex-girlfriend, before marriage:

Feroz with another woman. Someone he must've cared enough for to want to marry. Someone to whom he had given an engagement ring. So it was all a lie, his declarations about no other woman had haunted him the way she, Sera, had; about he had never known love until Sera had entered his life? What to make, then, of that relentless, eager way in which he had pursued her- was that merely the desperate, last-ditch effort of a middle-aged man who did not want to spend his life alone? Could any Parsi woman with reasonable good looks have caught his eye? Or had he picked her precisely because she was twenty-eight years old and was beginning to give off the scent of being desperate and in-wanted? Had he sensed something about her, some vulnerability, some defect, some weakness, that he was able to exploit? Had she blinded herself deliberately to his flaws, had she allowed herself to be flattered by his obvious desire for her? (85-86)

Sera overcome by a sense of disgust. The mental agony caused by the thought of retiring submission crunched her revealing how a woman internalizes man made constructs so deeply that at times she is ignorant of her own mental, physical and sexual exploitation. On enquiring about his ex-relation, Sera was insulted by him: "I didn't tell you, my dear, he said, spitting each word out as if they were stuck between his teeth, because frankly, it's none of your business"

(87). Though she tried to be a modern independent woman, lacked the power of will so was made silent:

She felt a pain in her stomach, as if his contempt had reached her like a punch. "I'm your wife," she said weakly.

"Correct. You're my wife. Now. Today. You weren't my wife then. And what I did then was my business. Nothing to do with you, okay?" (87)

She realized that her marriage with Feroz had denied her the freedom and fullness, satisfaction and completeness. The moment Feroz had repented for his rude behaviour she was calmed: "And even as she was grateful for his words, she was aware of a feeling of letdown, of having betrayed herself. She knew that she had taken the easy way out, that she had let the steam escape from the boiling pot of her emotions. What she had meant to say was not "I love you" at all. What she had wanted to say was "I love life," a self declaration as naked and real and authentic as an X-ray" (89). Sera had the 'steam', she had the 'feminine power' but she used it for endurance instead of exercising it to come out of the game of power in order to mutually construct a world of equality with Feroz.

Sera was often beaten up by him and the time when he left for days after banging her highlights the intense suffering, loneliness and isolation of women. Yet instead of retorting, Sera now remembers to had longed for his call: "She kept waiting for Feroz to apologize by mail or phone, to acknowledge her pain, to enquire about her bruised body" (107). She dangled like a pendulum between rejection and acceptance. She had been aggravated at Feroz's insensitiveness and callousness towards her yet could not live without him. However, Sera recalls that one morning an inexpressible sense of uneasiness gripped her and all of a sudden she decided to leave for her parent's house with her daughter Dinaz. Somewhere in her unconsciousness leaving Feroz seemed to be the only way escaping violence of her marriage and becoming her own self.

But she was so puzzled by the way her life was going that at that time she did not even realize that her decision of leaving was a gesture of rebellion. Though she took the step towards freedom, confused because of lack of courage and determination she called Feroz to make him realize his mistake. She again willingly surrendered herself before Feroz, he did not have to pressurize her to do that. Feroz instead of listening her had hung up the phone on her leaving her dumbstruck.

Sera could not even share her problem with her parents. Thrity Umrigar projects Sera's parents to be helpless: "[...] they were too old to have to rescue her, to fight her battles for her" (189). Sera parents were not the ones who inculcate patriarchal values in their daughter and make her conform to the stereotyped gender roles. Infact Jehroo, Sera's mother before her marriage "[...] had tried to warn her about Banu. She had offered to make enquires, to track down rumors"

(189) of Banu being a cruel lady. But when Sera came back to them, they were not in the condition to help her. They had grown old and above all thinking that a woman without a husband has no future asked her to make adjustments, that is, indirectly told her to 'conform'. Sera also knew that her parents can not help her and thus, when her mother inquires about her marital happiness, she does not tell her problem clearly to save her parents from the tension of her unhappy marriage. She married Feroz with her own choice, dismissing 'arrogantly' her mother's 'offer' but in a long run realized that her decision was not right. Loving Feroz and his family brought only pain to her as she had totally become dependent.

Sera's ordeals were not limited to the thrashes; Feroz even blamed her of infidelity. She had been an innocent, honest and devoted wife yet like any other of her kind she was made to suffer and pay a heavy price for her sincerity and honesty. Feroz was engaged to a girl before his marriage with Sera yet he did not find it necessary to be discussed with Sera; however, on the basis of his insecurity doubted Sera's character. He accused her of "Flirting with a waiter [...] Smiling at him, saying thank you every damn time he filled your glass with water" (165). Sera did what etiquettes say but being a woman became the victim of double standards. The reality was he himself lacked the trust which is a binding force in a marriage. He exemplifies one of those men who perceive women to be mere feminine bodies, lacking emotions and feelings. Not for once he gave a thought that how can a woman who loves him despite of his regular beatings, ditch him. His doubt reduces Sera to nothing: "Even as the pain in her arm receded a tiny bit, the pain in her heart grew. She cried at the swift brutality of Feroz's violent gesture; she sobbed at the injustice of his false accusation; and above all, she cried at the thought of spending year after year in the company of a man who thought so little that he could blithely accuse her of flirting with a common waiter" (167). Why always since ages women, whether Sita¹ or Sera have to suffer due to the mere suspicion.

Nonetheless, this dark despair, loss of selfhood and identity was not the end. Sera was also the victim of her orthodox, oppressive and hostile mother-in-law, Banu. The way Banu behaved with Sera during her menstruation cycle shows how women during periods are regarded as defiled and unclean object. Sera was treated as an untouchable. Banu tortured her to such an extent that:

Sera felt that she was up against something insidious; that Banu was assaulting both her body and her mind. So this is evil, she thought to herself. Before, she had always imagined that evil played out on a large canvas - wars, concentration camps, gas

¹ Sita is one of the main characters in the Valmiki's Ramayana, a Hindu epic. She was abducted by Ravana and kept in captivity by him and thus she had to go through 'Agni-Pariksha', the test of going through the fire, in order to prove her chastity to her husband and the world.

chambers, the partitioning of nations. Now, she realized that evil had a domestic side, and its very banality protected it from exposure. (82)

Sera, with open eyes saw the cruelty of her husband and mother-in-law. She was the conscious victim of the engulfing force but did not take a substantial stand and therefore, what is to be bemoaned is the deficiency of inner strength. Whatever freedom she desired, had to be dug within the bounds of her home and responsibilities. Though Sera's laugh when Banu scolds her for coming in the kitchen without washing her hair is a symbolic act of destroying the silence that marginalization has imposed on her yet she could never assert herself completely. Though realizing that one can not build a home on the shaky foundations of pretence, Sera once tried to leave her husband's home yet finding herself in a state of dilemma was easily tempted to follow her father-in-law's advice to return back to Feroz. Sera represents the inner struggles and sufferings of those new Indian women whose English education though exposes them to the issue of women emancipation but they still lack the courage to cut the roots of the traditional patriarchal Indian system which shapes them. They are stuck between tradition and modernity.

Bhima was the only one who understood the hollowness of Sera's existence and encouraged her to come out of it: "You are much wiser than I am, an educated woman while I am illiterate. But, bai, listen to me- do not tolerate what he is doing to you. Tell somebody. Tell your father- he will march in here and break his nose. You are trying to cover up your shame, bai, I know, but it is not your shame. It is Feroz's shame, not yours" (111). A man's use of his physical strength to enslave a woman is a form of violence and therefore, Bhima is right in saying that shame is of Feroz's. The perpetrator of violence has to be ashamed of the bruises of violence on the victim's body not the victim herself. The victim's shame lies in losing her sense of self respect, thus Sera should not try to hide her marks or Feroz's violent deeds from anyone.

Bhima used to nurse Sera when Feroz used to beat her: "Bhima took a pinch of dark brown powder and mixed it in the oil. [...] Then she poured the oil on her rough, calloused hands and began to rub Sera's arms" (108). Umrigar here reworks the feminine and masculine roles. It is not the traditional Indian fable world where the prince calms the princess in distress rather it is one woman acting as balm to the problems of other's exploitation. By subverting the traditional roles and transgressing the gender boundaries, Umrigar like Judith Butler, remarks that gender is a construct laid down by the society consciously for subjugating women. Women can rid themselves and attain freedom from such cultural constructs. This bond can also be seen as an explication of the three phases expounded by Elaine Showalter². The first phase is the feminine stage, where a woman silently succumbs to the conventions and norms. Then comes the feminist stage where women protest against the patriarchal values and demand freedom and power and

² Elaine Showalter discusses it in *A Literature of Their Own*. The explication used is also quoted in Moi, Toril. *Sexual/ Textual Politics: Feminist Literary theory*. London and New York: Routledge, 1985.56.

finally the 'female' phase where they call women to search for their identity. However, Bhima advises Sera to take a radical and bold step to rescue her from an insensitive and violent husband. Conversely, Sera maintained her silence and did not rail against all this suppression till the time Feroz lived.

Feroz's death and Banu's incapacitating illness free her from their confinement and she lives happily after that with her daughter and beloved son-in-law, Viraf. She admits that she "have never been as happy as I have these three years, with the children living with me [...]" (263). She neither regrets nor laments much at Feroz's death and confesses to herself that "The home that you never got with your husband, you now have with your husband, you now have with your daughter and son-in-law. Viraf and Dinaz provided you with your life's dream" (263).

But today the same Bhima who tried to instigate spark in Sera is caught in a cage set up by insensitive brutal man and his society. Bhima has always been a brave woman but Maya's pregnancy has left her helpless. She has never been seen as "[...] defeated as she did today. Not even when Gopal had left and taken with him the most precious gift in Bhima's life" (43).

Gopal, Bhima's husband had married her out of genuine love. He won Bhima's heart by his endless wooing, he used to sing: "Mere sapon ki rani kab aayegi tu? The queen of my dreams, when will you arrive?"³ (60) to flatter her and on their wedding night: "With a leap, Gopal sprang up and stood on the bed. He raised both hands above his head like a triumphant boxer. "Yes, I am a crazy man, the crazy head of the household," he declared, [...] we are going to have so much fun the rest of our lives. You just wait, woman, I am going to treat you like a queen that you are" (64-65). But after fifteen years of their marriage he broke this promise.

Gopal was thrown out of his job without a deserved compensation when he had lost his three fingers in an accident occurred at his work place. Frustrated, he sank into alcoholism and soon became lazy and worthless. Bhima left with no other option, on one hand courageously replaced him and formed the pivot and nucleus of the family and on the other, accepted his rage in order to lessen his frustration and pain. Gradually, Gopal reduced to a stereotypical Indian male who enjoys in making his wife suffer. He used to take out his frustration by being violent with her and she used to submit. She even quietly underwent the traumatic experience of the nightly sexual assaults by her frustrated husband: "[...] his lovemaking became more desperate, relentless, and violent" (233). From a *rani*⁴ he soon diminishes her to the status of a *dasi*⁵. He even started to

³'Mere sapon ki rani kab aayegi tu' is a famous [Hindi](#) song from the 1969 [Bollywood](#) movie [Aradhana](#).

⁴ Rani means queen.

steal the money she earned for their survival, for his alcohol. But Bhima still did not complain to avoid conflict. However, when Gopal stole the money Bhaima had kept for her son, Amit's medicines, she decided not to take the coward's way out anymore. Conquering every fear of her she bravely marched to bootlegger's den where Gopal had been drinking and "[...] pulled out the broom from behind her back and began to beat him with it" (243). Without worrying about society and prestige, she yelled:

"Saala, besharam, .mawali,"[...] crashing the broom on his body repeatedly. "Cur. Mad dog with rabies. Snake born of your mother's belly. Lowest of the low. Serpent, pig. Motherfucker. The machine should have cut of your penis along with your fingers. Hijda, that's what you are. You're a eunuch not a man. After all, a real man doesn't leave his sick child at home while he does drinking with other local loafers". (243)

Bhima broke the rule of patriarchy to be free of the arrogant dominance of her husband. But being a man Gopal could not bear this public humiliation. Patriarchy accepts 'wife beating' and does not consider it to be an offence but 'husband beating' is even beyond the realm of imagination, a phrase that does not even exist. Nonetheless, this stand of Bhima also illustrates that women have to make their choices, set their priorities: to fight or to lead a life of all accepting wife. Women writers have to not only expose but deconstruct the social taboos. Margaret Atwood pronounces in an article entitled "If You Can't Say Something Nice, Don't Say Anything At All" that:

"Women of my generation were told only to hobble with our high heels and our panty girdles on. We were told endlessly: *thou shall not*. We don't need to hear it again, and especially not for women. Feminism has done many good things for many women writers, but surely the most important has been the permission to say the unsaid, to encourage women to claim their full humanity, which means acknowledging the shadows as well as the lights". (24)

Gopal ends up becoming a butt of ridicule and unable to take this abuse, he sought revenge by abandoning Bhima and their daughter Pooja, taking along with him their son to his village. Bhima endured this desertion and recovered soon to deal with the other hardships waiting for her. For instance, she alone bravely handled both Pooja and her husband in the hospital. They both were suffering from AIDS. Pooja's husband has passed it to her. Bhima could not save both of them but promised Pooja to take care of her daughter Maya. Bhaima further assured her that "I will make sure that not a hair on your daughter's head is harmed, as long as I'm alive" (155).

⁵ Dasi means maid.

From that day Bhima is striving hard to keep up her promise. She devotes her entire life in bringing up Maya as a dignified and independent human being. Instead of adhering to her present plight, Bhima dreams to come out of it, she fights. Being a 'poor low class woman', Bhima is completely obliterated from formal education yet is intelligent enough to realize the void created by the lack of education in her life. She remembers the way Feroz Seth ordered the doctors to look after Gopal when the latter was lying unattended in the hospital after his accident. At that time and on many more similar occasions she had thought "[...] this is what education does [...]" (217). Bhima always wished to be educated. Umrigar writes: "Bhima wished, not for the first time, that she had been educated herself" (23).

Bhima knows that education can help her and Maya to come out of the pain and pangs of poverty and ostracized class and thus sends Maya to school. After the completion of school, she even gets her enrolled in a college. Bhima thus gives Maya an opportunity to come out of the oppressive system in which low class women like them are made to live. She in a way revolts with a hope of freedom and equality but all her dreams are dashed by Maya's out-of-wedlock pregnancy. As Maya stubbornly refuses to reveal the name of her victimizer, Bhima not having left with any other option, decides to do what Sera advises her in order to save Maya's life. She decides to get the child aborted: "[...] an abortion was the only way" (37). She discusses it with Maya: "People are talking. And you can't hide your shame in this room forever. Soon, even your salwar-khamez won't be able to hide your belly. Already, too much time has passed. We need to get you to the doctor soon" (56). To her surprise Maya does not revolt against her decision but keeps a condition: "[...] I want Serabai to go to the hospital with me instead of you" (56). An abortion is a kind of brutalization which a woman has to undergo in order to avoid another kind of brutalization. Finally, Sera takes Maya to a private abortion clinic and gets her purge of her baby.

Bhima now struggles to bring back Maya to life. She urges her to pick up and move on. She tries to revive her broken spirits and thus one day takes her out to Chowpatty for dinner. Bhima takes Maya to cheer her up but herself faces the greatest trial that awaits her. There they meet Sera, Dinaz and Viraf who have come to have bhelpuri. Dinaz who is pregnant with Viraf's child was craving for bhelpuri. Observing Viraf's behaviour towards Maya, Bhima is shocked. The sign of fear on Viraf's face assures Bhima that he has disgraced Maya: "It was strange how she found out. One moment she didn't know the next minute she did. One moment her mind was as blank as desert; the next minute the snake of suspicion had slithered into her thoughts and raised its poisonous head. And now she must live with the earth-shattering knowledge that Viraf Davar was the father of Maya's dead child" (267). She confirms it with Maya. She asks Maya to narrate the "whole story" (270) of Viraf's crime.

Viraf had went to see Banu at her flat and over there finding Maya alone could not control his pent up physical desires. He seduced the young girl to commit wrong. After the act he himself

confessed: ““Been so long...,” she half-heard him say. “Dinaz’s pregnancy...so frigid...won’t let me near her...”” (278). He exploits a girl’s vulnerability and uses her as a sex object, an object devoid of any emotions and dignity. Maya initially did not even realize that she is being seduced for mere gratification of sexual desire. Their intercourse tantamount to rape, the most heinous crime a man commits against a woman. During the act Viraf’s movements had hurt Maya but after the act his indifference towards her humiliated her. He had insensitively invaded Maya’s body and after his purpose was over, he left her as if she is a prostitute. He did not bother to think once that what will happen to Maya after his forced violation of her body, instead blames her for the act: “Listen Maya [...] that was a bad thing you did, tempting me like that, taking advantage of me while I was in a weak mood” (279). He even smothers her voice by threatening her: “If you tell anybody what happened, who do you think they are going to believe? You or me? First of all, I’ll deny everything. Be sensible and don’t do anything to jeopardize your education or Bhima’s job” (279). Viraf left Maya to suffer silently and bear the punishment of his crime.

Bhima is infuriated after knowing the reality. Even the thought of Viraf reminds her that his “[...] pleasure has derailed her Maya’s life, has blocked the path that would have taken the girl out of the slum. What she and Serabai had built together, Viraf has destroyed. Women create [...] men destroy. The way of the world” (283). However Viraf on the other hand, sensing the danger plots to get rid of Bhima and Maya completely. In front of Sera he accuses Bhima of theft. Viraf carries the plan so cunningly that he succeeds in deteriorating Bhima’s image in Sera’s eyes. But when Sera breeches the unsaid bond of trust, Bhima transmutes into a pillar of strength and raises her voice against the injustice done to Maya. She openly pronounces the truth of Viraf. However Sera still lacking the courage to boldly oppose and fight patriarchy quashes Bhima’s claim and throws her out of her home.

Sera’s desertion does not defeat Bhima but instead acts as her final awakening to the ways of the world. Total alienation acts as a blessing in disguise for Bhima as it leaves her with a free will: “She is almost grateful to Viraf baba now, for his treachery has been the knife that has cut the thread that kept her bound for so long” (315). This betrayal becomes the James Joyce ‘epiphany’ or ‘moment of being’ as Virginia Woolf calls it, for Bhima. Her vision becomes clear and she gets rid of all her inner conflicts. She cuts the roots which stand for domination. She has understood that living in relations does not mean to be restrained by them: “Soon, the loneliness stops its wailing, and then fear ceases its numbing drone, and all that is left is freedom- incessant, surging and powerful” (315). She frees herself from the bondage of class and gender and gains freedom with courage. She breaks every physical and mentalk shackle to assert her ‘being’: “Freedom” (315) lies in her heart now. From a *dasi* she is again the ‘queen’, queen of her heart.

DISCUSSION

From dusk to dawn, Bhima emerges to be a changed person who is independent and complete in herself: “It is dark, but inside Bhima’s heart it is dawn” (321). Shirin Kudchedkar rightly writes in “Feminist voices in India and Canada”, that “[...] feminist writers are concerned with women’s self to discover herself and find self- fulfillment. Their stories deal with the woman’s or girl’s encounter with the world, her efforts to define herself, to find viable ways of living” (2)

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