

WOMEN IN THE SELECT NOVELS OF THRITY UMRIGAR: A STUDY

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SUMMATION



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Tell us what is it to be a woman so that we may
know what it is to be a man. What moves at the
margin. What it is to have no home in this place. To
be set adrift from the one you knew. What it is to live
at the edge of towns that cannot bear your company.

Toni Morrison (Nobel Lecture, 1993)

Women writers are paving new paths and searching to reach new horizons in literature. The emergence of the 'New woman' and her quest for identity, her fortitude and endurance to define herself as a person of individuality and potential on par with, if not more than a man are depicted authentically in their works. As carefully observed of human psyche and behaviour, with a fine eye for details, Thrity Umrigar brings in her narratives and characters to life, illustrating her themes, without making moral judgements about her women who are neither saints nor villains, just ordinary people leading the best lives they can, using whatever resources are available. Umrigar's characters, both the major and the minor ones, are very real and compelling. Her novels are full of wisdom and subtle parallels; they are funny and bitterly sad, but generally optimistic and never preach and predict.

Thrity Umrigar an Indo American writer does not write in isolation; her writings include social reality. In fact the relation

between literature and society is reciprocal; both serve as cause and effect to each other. A literary creation does not come into existence by itself; its emergence is determined by social situations. Umrigar writes with deep insight and consideration, in a language that is expressive as well as uncomplicated. In all her novels, she takes the readers deep into the multi layered world of characters, the world that is crammed with poverty, terror, negativity, optimism and discovery. Her writings are clear and honest.

‘Woman’ is the centre of her fictional world. Thrity Umrigar is a writer whose heroines succeed in maintaining a complete balance in life by asserting their individualism within the boundaries of social bondages. Her desires, efforts and failures in the traditional Indian society are the main highlights of her novels. Her women are modern, self sustained, yet they are bound by the traditional norms of the society. Umrigar being in India has witnessed in her writings the typical tradition and the modern feminine sensibility. She makes it clear that hers is not the strident and militant kind of feminism which sees man as the cause of all troubles.

According to her an Indian woman is different from her counterpart in the western countries. Women in India suffer and adjust themselves. Her novels delve into the expectations of Indian women and relates their search for strength and independence, they detail with complex characters that are caught in a net of relationships partly of their own making and partly made by the

precepts of society. Her depiction of women's world is authentic, realistic and credible. Umrigar wants people to relate themselves to her characters so that they can feel their joy and pain, since it will be harder to be prejudiced when they meet them in real life. The pivotal concern of all her writings is women.

Each story is a microscopic representation of familial relations, redefining new cultural spaces. Commenting on the significance and the characteristics of literature author Milton Albrect says:

Literature reflects accepted patterns of thoughts, feelings and action, including patterns of expressions and society. It innovates giving expressions to emerging themes that may yet not be defined in literal terms. (Milton 425-36).

The preceding chapters have been devoted to the study of women protagonists in the novels of Thrity Umrigar. She portrays modern, educated and career-oriented middle class married women who are sensitive to the changing times and situations. Revealing a remarkable insight into the nature of a woman's mind, she depicts woman in myriad roles – wife, mother, daughter and an individual in her own right. She always concerns herself with a woman's search for her identity. She endeavours to establish woman as an individual who breaks loose from the traditional constraints and redefines her identity in tune with the changed social ambience of the modern times.

Umrigar is a modern writer of 21st century, she is aware of women's education and her prioritising women's education over traditional settling of women is found clearly in her writings. Coomi, in *Bombay Time*, in her quest to be independent and complete, realises that there is lot she has given and in return she receives very little, yet she moves with optimism. Another important feature one finds in Umrigar's writing is that her women characters prioritised enlightenment through education rather than fitting themselves into the folds of family system. Coomi was humiliated by her professor and his words proved a block in her attaining higher education. Like her husband Coomi had dreams of her own. Her dreams died within her and never blossomed as they were ridiculed and mocked at by her family members. There are many such women like Coomi who found hard to realise their dreams because of the social stigma that does not allow women to grow and aspire beyond the walls of marital binding.

The author displays sympathy towards her characters and does empathize with the living conditions of her female protagonists. As her characters are silent, it signifies that they are in a state of oppression, which in turn is a characteristic of the subaltern condition, while speech signifies self-expression and liberation. Women like Sera and Bhima, who had no option, nevertheless accepted everything as their lot and survived only to fulfil their 'dharma' to please their husbands were left with severe pain.

Traditions, patriarchy, culture make them confine totally to the cruel submissions in the hands of their men which in return does not allow them to search for their individuality and identity. They confront the opposite and it compels them to renew themselves in order to evolve to a higher degree of consciousness. The common concern running through these novels is the problem of identity. The inability, sometimes situational and sometimes imposed, to fit oneself in the right slot in the scheme of things; the individual and society, the individual in society; form the persistent concerns in the novels.

Though tyrannically subjugated to gender discrimination, tortured in the name of marital relationships, subjected to child abuse, or raped, or forced to bear humiliations in the name of widowhood; whatever the nomenclature designated, these women survived accepting it as their fate and lot. Transgressing these rules was treated as a sin. Coomi, Dosamai, Sera, Bhima, Maya, Saraswathi belonged to this class of traditional slot.

Unwilling to confine themselves within the strong folds of patriarchy they always attempt to seek an option to move on in life. These women are intelligent, have a questioning attitude and are not contented with the justice they were asked to be complied with. They do not hesitate to rebel against the patriarchy as they see it not just as a site of their oppression at home and in society but also make it a field of battle to vanquish their oppressors.

The novels of Thrity Umrigar projected the policy of female predicament, women and their search for the bliss and excitement of life which are always deprived of. Not all her women characters are deprived of life but women like Tehmina and Ellie are conquerors. In the novels *If Today Be Sweet* and *The Weight of Heaven* the novelists have successfully weaved a pattern – a pattern with a strong message of ‘hope through change’ and the ending is revealed as another beginning. The novels, have presented carefully the different phases of transition of women from being tied to nativity to being rooted in another country. Women like Tehmina and Ellie battled with the ties of the past and acquired a new sensitivity towards life. Life, like cyclone, triggered despair and uncertainty but Umrigar’s women characters emerged as survivors. The author look’s at the predicament of women and visualizes life for a woman as a series of obligations and commitments. In addition to existentialistic reality of life they evoke the sentiment and sensibility of women for their role and respect in society. Umrigar closely examines the emotional world of womankind. They set themselves to voice the voiceless miseries and helplessness of millions of married women, tormented by existentialist problems and predicaments. Umrigar’s focus is on how her heroines are bravely struggling against or helplessly submitting to the relentless forces of absurd life in their relationships. As D. H. Lawrence opines in his book *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* (1929) opines that:

The great relationship for humanity will always be the relationship between man and woman. The relation between man and woman, woman and woman, parent and child will always be subsidiary. (LCL 130)

The strength of these women lies not in accepting the devastation of life but in renewing themselves from the shackles of burden and bars. The novelists try to show that life is not an encumbrance of affliction and anxiety but it prepares us to face the twists and turns of life with courage and strength.

Thus Thrity Umrigar is a woman of heart and an excellent writer. She is not a writer who writes for the sake of writing. Her writings are a hope to many women. All her ideas are born with experience. Most of her women characters are real, some resemble her aunt or niece within her family, Bhima is such character which is real. It is said in the post script of the novel *The Space Between Us*. Her novels are pleasure to read and carry slight sense of humour too. At last to conclude with her remarks from the post script of the novel *If Today Be Sweet*:

When I look back on my writing life, I see that the vehicles may be different- poems, short stories, newspaper articles, novels- but the passengers remain the same. The passengers are always grappling with darkness and trying to find the light.” (5)

To sum up 'Women' are better today they are no longer subject to man, but far off they are not equal with men. Women, have been looked down upon by men. Some men today believe a woman has no right to pursue a career other than being a housewife and mother. Every woman deserves a certain amount of respect. When looked into the life of a woman one understands how hard a woman's life is. Women are strong beings who have earned their rights to equality and respect. Women have and continue to be strong individuals and work towards equality and for a better by creating a future of their own, because women are born free. They ought to be free. To remember Olympe de Gouges, in *The Declaration of the Rights of Woman* stated (September 1791):

Woman is born free and her rights are the same as those of a man ... The law must be an expression of the general will; all citizens, men and women alike, must participate in making it ... it must be the same for all ... All citizens ... must be equally eligible for all public offices, positions and jobs, according to their capacity and without any other criteria than those of their virtues and talents ...

(https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Declaration_of_the_Rights_of_Woman_and_the_Female_Citizen)



~ Thrity Umrigar



~ Sharon Luther

INTERVIEW WITH THE AUTHOR



An Interview with Thrity Umrigar

By V. Sharon Luther

1. Are you a feminist writer?

If you define feminism as an ideology that believes in the full equality of women and is against discrimination toward women, then I am indeed a feminist. But as a writer, I don't like putting labels on myself. I am a writer who happens to be a feminist.

2. Does any of your women characters are etched as your autobiographical characters?

When I was starting out as a writer, I did indeed model some of my characters on people I knew or stories I'd heard. But with more experience, I find myself using my imagination more and relying less on autobiography.

3. The women characters in your fictional world especially in 'Bombay Time & the Space between Us' seem to be modern at the edge of their life, but, as they continue to get along they tend to shift from modernity to tradition. What are your reflections?

I think in that sense, they are like India itself—a nation that is attempting to move toward modernity but is essentially a traditional culture. A country divided between two poles. Much like the country, many of my characters, especially the well-to-do and educated ones, think of themselves as modern. But in

times of crisis or challenges, they revert back to the traditional dictates of the culture, because it is more familiar and therefore, safer.

4. As an immigrant women writer, what functional and cultural similarities do you find in the works of American Women writers?

Well, America is a nation of immigrants, so many American writers are telling stories about the immigrant experience—recent or old—and others are writing books that explore issues of identity and what it means to survive as a woman in a changing world. Of course, depending on the writer, some of them are writing about women characters who are so comfortable in their economic and even cultural freedoms, that there are few Indian equivalents for them. In other words, women who can revel in their freedoms with no censoring force, nobody out there to “punish” them for breaking cultural taboos or questioning gender assumptions.

5. How would you prefer a researcher looking at you... is it like knowing you as an Indian women writer or as an Indian American writer?

I have never thought of myself as an Indian writer or a woman writer or an Indian-American writer. I simply write my books and leave the labels to critics and others.

6. In an interview you said “your inspirations are Salman Rushdie and Emily Dickinson”, apart from these writers which women writer you like the most and why.

There are too many to name. I do love Toni Morrison, Marilyn Robinson and Jennifer Egan. Even though they are very different writers and have different subjects and time periods they are interested in, what unites them is the beauty of their language and the control they exhibit over their characters and storytelling.