

Bridging the Divide: Exploring the Complexities of Class, Power, and Gender-Based Violence in Thrity Umrigar's *The Space Between Us*

Karishma Bharti

Research Scholar, University of Lucknow

Abstract

Violence against people based on their gender is a widespread and complicating issue, impacting millions around the world. At its core, this type of violence comes from an unequal distribution of power, societal norms, organizations, and individuals all help continue violence against those who are less privileged, especially women and girls. This study delves into the complexities of gender based violence, examining its causes, consequences and intersections with social, cultural, and economic power. Violence based on gender can manifest in various ways, and based on the nature of the relationship and the kind of power involved. The connections between men and women and their origins and consequences, the various types of stereotypes, and the infringement of gender based violence extend beyond just the issue of violence. However, it is impossible to fully understand the different aspects of social injustice without recognizing this as a significant manifestation of gender-based inequality and imbalance. The issue is not only the disparities between genders but also the prevailing gender system itself. By exploring the complexities of gender, power and violence in Thrity Umrigar's novel *The Space Between Us*, the purpose of this paper is to examine the problem lies in the classification of gender as a binary and hierarchical concept. The construction of gender is based on unequal power dynamics, linking masculinity to authority, dominance, and control.

Keywords: Gender-based violence, Society, Marginalization, Power, Culture, Social norms, Class

Thrity Umrigar is a well-known Indian-American writer, journalist, and teacher. Umrigar's own experiences as an immigrant and her observations on social issues inspired her to write books that explore the themes of social status, identity, class, culture and gender. Her popular books, like *The Space Between Us* (2005), *The Weight of Heaven* (2009), *The World We Found* (2012) and *The Secrets Between Us* (2018) look into the complicated world of human relationships and the everyday challenges people face. The story takes place in Mumbai, now known as Bombay, during the new millennium. Where people desire to go and complete their dreams. Here, people from different cultures and traditions live together. "Bombay is a city of dreams and city of hopes, the financial and commercial capital of country" (Katiyar, 2014). The novel focuses on Bhima, who experiences multiple betrayals from the government, the hospital when her daughter and son-in-law die, and Gopal's factory, which denies to take responsibility for his accident. Bhima finds strength in her granddaughter Maya, who supports her in the fight against discrimination and gender-based violence.

The Space Between Us is a social realist novel, that represents increasing social divisions through the lens of an institution. Harish in *Cultural Anthropology* states that “India's legal system today encourages discrimination based on caste identity. Caste still plays an important part in the people's everyday lives. Hindu religion continuous to have powerful sanctions against those who violate caste prescriptions” (2007).

Umrigar like Premchand wrote their works that challenged upper-middle class morality in order to convey the ideas of gender and class based reformation and upliftment. The story is told from the perspective of Bhima, a housekeeper of a middle class widow Sera. Umrigar describes that how everyday life of Indian society has changed by the economic power. Sera is a well educated and generous woman who pays for Maya's education and helps her in many conditions. Sera always treats Bhima like a family member "like she is the Kohinoor diamond" (Umrigar 170).

The divisions created by class and power in society perpetuate inequality and violence, with the experiences of women from lower socioeconomic backgrounds highlighting this issue. The novel brings attention to the deeply rooted patriarchal structures that govern Indian society. Viraf, Serabai's husband, represents the oppressive male archetype, exerting dominance over his wife's freedom and physical being. Bhima, a low-income domestic worker, experiences mistreatment and exploitation at the hands of her husband, Hari. Umrigar effectively portrays how traditional male-dominated standards contribute to violence based on gender. Sera does everything for Bhima but always maintain a social distance from her. She discriminates her because of her class difference. “They are sitting in the dining room, sipping tea. Sera out of the blue-grey mug Dinaz had bought for her from Cottage Industries. Bhima out of the stainless steel glass that is kept aside for her in the Dubash households. As usual, Sera sits on a chair at the table while Bhima squats on her haunches on the floor nearby” (Umrigar, pp. 27).

The Space Between Us fosters this empathic state of mind by foregrounding the perspectives of the female servant through its representations of Bhima's consciousness, including her inner monologues. Although the key events of Bhima's and Sera's lives are intimately tied, the narrative begins and ends with Bhima's point of view, which is juxtaposed with, and in turn decenters, the socially privileged voice of her employer (Mangharam, 2018). The prevalence of domestic violence in Indian households is highlighted by Umrigar. Serabai's marriage is characterized by both emotional and physical abuse, reflecting the experiences of numerous women. Bhima's narrative emphasizes the compounded vulnerabilities experienced by lower-caste women. The way individuals are treated is impacted by power and ownership. Those in the lower class often have restricted access and resources compared to those in the higher class. The economic status highlights the disparity between the higher and lower classes. The prosperous people have more power than the people who have very little. Discrimination is not limited to class, but also extends to race and gender.

The Space Between Us delves into the intricacies of modern-day India, exploring social class, identity, power, violence, and relationships through the lives of two women, Serabai Dubash and Bhima. The book masterfully examines power dynamics, loyalty, and empathy through their intertwined stories. It highlights the sharp contrast between the wealthy housewife Serabai and her devoted servant Bhima, whose lives are symbolized by their respective physical spaces: Serabai's luxurious home and Bhima's humble slum. Umrigar adeptly portrays how social class influences their experiences, opportunities, and relationships. The people who have power in India influence the circumstances of the society. They can treat lower class people unequally or as they want. Education does not matter, only power or economic condition matters

for them. “As a matter of fact, such a system remains exactly as exploitative, if not more, than colonial forms of domination in the subcontinent. Particularly harmed are individuals belonging to certain marginalized castes, the rural poor, and gendered subjects like the women characters she analyses from novels and films produced in post-liberalization India” (Bhowmick, 2024).

The space between lower and upper classes is marked by profound inequalities, perpetuating gender-based violence and social injustice. Women's friendships and solidarity offer a powerful counter-narrative, bridging divides and challenging dominant power structures. Collective action, informed by intersectional analysis, is crucial to dismantling these oppressive systems and creating a more equitable society. There are many modes of class struggle practiced by people of lower class to reach higher social class. The most common ways era class struggle through violence, proletarian revolution, and dictatorship of proletariat (Wilczynski, 1984). The author highlights how the novel addresses caste issues within the realm of casualized domestic labor in the Indian city of Mumbai. Gender-based violence requires an intersectional approach, recognizing the interconnectedness of class, power, space, and gender. Women's movements must prioritize the voices and experiences of marginalized communities, amplifying their demands for justice and equality. Even with these obstacles, Sera and Bhima establish a strong connections that transcend class differences, nurturing resilience and solidarity. Women forming friendships across various socioeconomic backgrounds defy societal expectations and narrow the gap between different social classes. These connections offer emotional reinforcement, tangible aid, and a forum for joint advocacy efforts. “Umrigar’s projection of India is essentially a feminine diasporic expression of the emotional memory of her inner consciousness” (Parui, 2019). In her depiction of the intricate dynamics between affluent homemaker Sera and her impoverished housemaid Bhima, Umrigar exposes the striking disparities in their respective worlds. Sera's privilege and social status grant her power, yet also trap her in a gilded cage of patriarchal expectations. Bhima, despite her poverty and lack of education, exhibits a quiet strength and endurance forged through survival. Umrigar adeptly demonstrates how class distinctions perpetuate exploitation, suppression, and marginalization, as Bhima's contributions go unnoticed and her experiences are diminished. Conversely, Sera's dependence on Bhima highlights the interconnectedness of their lives, blurring the boundaries between mistress and servant. Through this nuanced portrayal, Umrigar critiques the rigid social hierarchies and power imbalances that sustain inequality, shedding light on the complex web of relationships that both unite and divide women across socioeconomic divides.

In India, there is a strong connection between power and class, which leads to significant social and economic inequalities. The country's hierarchical caste system, colonial history, and neoliberal economic strategies have all contributed to the creation of extensive disparities. Class divisions are further complicated by caste, religion, and gender, resulting in a complex matrix of oppression. Addressing structural inequalities, promoting social mobility, and empowering marginalized voices are crucial for bridging this divide. India's middle class is on the rise, but their upward mobility is uncertain, often reinforcing the existing social structure.

In *Nampally Road* (1991) by Meena Alexander and *Rich Like Us* (1983) by Nayantara Sahgal, there is an exploration of a powerful nonverbal connection across class, ethnicity, and culture that emphasizes the significance of female friendship. Similarly, In haveli novels of Hosain and Mehta, the intertwined tales of household servants and family women act as a contrast, a reflection, and sometimes a warning to each other. The fact that the stories of the servants and paid domestic workers as almost equally important as those of the family women indicates an understanding and sensitivity to issues of class and power. Their

interconnected narratives are not simply echoes of each other but rather serve as lessons on how class and social status affect and shape their different choices. “Sharing of spaces involves diverse associations with persons of different backgrounds, interests, and cultures. It thus creates connections and tensions requiring adjustments and accommodations. Besides the social dimension of space, there are also the aspects of culture and time that define or affect space. Since space is socially constructed, it implicates questions of identity, community, solidarity, and cultural difference” (Santos, 2016).

Umrigar portrays the various forms of violence, such as domestic abuse, emotional manipulation, sexual exploitation, and economic exploitation, through the experiences of two women, Sera and Bhima. Sera, a wealthy housewife, endures physical and emotional abuse from her husband, while Bhima, her maid, grapples with poverty, illiteracy, and sexual violence. The novel underscores how societal expectations, class divisions, and gender roles contribute to the perpetuation of silence and shame, ensnaring women in cycles of violence. Through nuanced storytelling, Umrigar humanizes the ordeals of survivors, emphasizing their resilience, solidarity, and the transformative influence of female friendships. By shedding light on the complex array of factors that fuel gender-based violence, Umrigar's novel prompts critical contemplation of the social, economic, and cultural circumstances that sustain such violence. In India, gender-based violence continues to be a serious issue, perpetuated by deeply ingrained patriarchal norms, economic disparities, and inadequate law enforcement. Despite having progressive laws, gender based violence remains widespread, with one out of every three women experiencing domestic violence. Factors such as limited access to education, economic reliance, and societal acceptance of violence worsen the problem. The consequences are severe: physical and psychological trauma, social exclusion, financial insecurity, and the passing down of violence through generations.

Umrigar’s novel efficiently captures the tension between “the body as personhood and the body as property embodied in the figure of the female domestic servant, thereby successfully illuminating economic and gender relations residing between caste, economic class, power and gender equations in India” (Bhowmick, 2024). It takes a team effort to eliminate the taboo around gender-based violence. By acknowledging its prevalence, challenging harmful norms, and supporting survivors, we can create a safer, more equitable society. Umrigar's main characters show incredible strength in the face of intense oppression. Bhima's unwavering commitment to educating her granddaughter, Maya, represents a beacon of hope for a brighter tomorrow. Serabai's gradual realization of her own power highlights the possibility of profound change. Umrigar skillfully depicts the oppressive nature of patriarchy, the prevalence of domestic violence, and the reliance on economic support, bringing a human touch to the struggles of survivors. The book emphasizes the pressing need for united efforts to eradicate systemic injustices and promote gender parity. To combat gender based violence, India must strengthen laws, improve law enforcement, promote education and economic independence, and challenge patriarchal traditions through awareness campaigns.

In India, we also can see the harsh reality of gender-based violence through the works of Indian writers, specially female writers. There is a rigid system of caste and class in India which is responsible for creating the “space” between high class and lower class. Dalits, forced labors and there are many more marginalized groups that face discrimination, oppression, and attacks.

Desai brings light on the brutal realities that underprivileged women in contemporary India confront through her captivating storytelling and empathic portrayal of individuals. At the same time, she celebrates the acts of defiance and solidarity that these women have displayed in the face of hardship (Desai, Kiswar, pp-43).

There is an important point that Arundhati Roy highlighted in her work where she talks about the people who are unable to make a stand for their own rights. She said there are countless individuals in society who are voiceless and silenced just because of the fear of powerful and affluent people who oppress the society. She also mentions that some women who face violence in their lives are not voiceless but this is the one issue that comes in every woman's life and it has been coming throughout the history. So, "voiceless" is not new in India, it is a part of every woman's life that can be seen in their life. Nobody has been written anything about them. They and their struggles are unseen. "The 'voiceless' do not really exist." Throughout the history of India, women have been subjected to a variety of challenges, including sexism, domestic violence, mental and physical abuse, and a great deal more (Roy, Arundhati 2017).

In the novel, *The Space Between Us* we can find the same situation of the main characters Bhima and Sera. They both are struggling with the violence. Sera is the victim of physical and abusive violence that have been done by her husband, Though she is a rich lady who has almost everything in her life but she is unable to make a stand for herself. Bhima who struggles with many issues like, torture, abuse, violence, health, financial issue and many more. She is voiceless because she works where she earn her livelihood and runs her family. She can not raise her voice because she doesn't have another option on which she can depend for her children. In today's time, there are many women who come in the same category of "voiceless". "When women are victims of economic violence, they are more likely to be trapped in cycles of poverty and reliance, which makes it tougher for them to escape violent situations and get their life back on track. This is because they are more likely to be dependent on others. The ability of women to flee violent situations is hampered as a result of this. Furthermore, it is a component that helps to the perpetuation of gender inequality by restricting the options that are available to women in terms of education, work, and the economy" (Bhasin, Kamala 1996 page. no. 2)

The Space Between Us effectively portrays the complexities of class divisions, the dynamics of women's relationships, power, authority, issues related to gender based violence, and the resilience of the women's spirits. By weaving together the lives of Sera and Bhima, Umrigar skillfully explores the complexities of Indian society, showcasing the oppressive forces that bind women as well as the empowering effect of women coming together. "The Space Between Us" leaves a deep impact on readers, and understanding for the lives of Indian women. The work is also challenging the stereotypes and also highlighting the shared experiences that connect us all. Umrigar's powerful storytelling is an appeal for social change, and an inspiration for readers to question, critically examine and dismantle the systems that perpetuate inequality in Indian society.

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