



Conference Paper

Traces of Gender Discrimination in Thrity Umrigar’s *Bombay Time*

Dr. Surabhi Panwar *

Guest Faculty, Government Girls College, Jhalamand, Jodhpur, Rajasthan, India

Corresponding Author: *Dr. Surabhi Panwar

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18007260>

Abstract

Literature is a powerful medium for raising awareness about the issues and evils in society. Gender discrimination is one of the major issues. “Gender is the repeated stylisation of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory framework that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being” (Butler, 2011, 43-44). The inequality between the sexes results in social gender discrimination, which hinders the economic growth and societal advancement of women. Gender discrimination refers to the social system's failure to provide equal opportunities for upward mobility for men and women (Sumi, 2012, p. 7). Women remain subjugated and marginalised due to gender inequality by the patriarchal construction of superiority and inferiority. Women are often considered to be meek, submissive and objects having no right over their own bodies and lives. They are regarded as a second sex and have to serve under the imposition of men. Men frequently use various factors like force, violence, insult and mental pressure to maintain their superiority. Women writers have boldly depicted the issues and predicaments of women in a male-dominated society in their works. One such woman writer is Thrity Umrigar. Her novels dealt with several themes, including friendship, race relations, class division, cultural differences, etc. This paper will be an attempt to trace gender discrimination and oppression of women in a patriarchal society in Thrity Umrigar’s novel *Bombay Time*.

Manuscript Information

- **ISSN No:** 2583-7397
- **Received:** 12-12-2024
- **Accepted:** 23-02-2025
- **Published:** 26-03-2025
- **IJCRM:4(SP1); 2025:138-141**
- **©2025, All Rights Reserved**
- **Plagiarism Checked:** Yes
- **Peer Review Process:** Yes

How to Cite this Article

Panwar S. Traces of Gender Discrimination in Thrity Umrigar’s *Bombay Time*. Int J Contemp Res Multidiscip. 2025;4(SP1):138-141.

Access this Article Online



www.multiarticlesjournal.com

KEYWORDS: Gender discrimination, patriarchy, women, Thrity Umrigar, *Bombay Time*.

INTRODUCTION

Literature is a reflection of society. It indeed reflects the good values and the evils of society. It works as a powerful form of activism for women writers. Women writers used their writings as a tool to bring forth the issues of gender discrimination and the struggles faced by women in a patriarchal society. One such writer is Thrity Umrigar. An Indian-American journalist, critic and writer, Thrity Umrigar was born in 1961 in Mumbai, India, to Noshir Umrigar and Ketty Umrigar. She belongs to a Parsi family and had a traditional middle-class upbringing. She completed her schooling from Catholic school. In order to be self-dependent, she relocated to the United States of America at the age of twenty-one. She grew up writing poetry as a child, short stories as a teenager and novels as an adult. She was fifteen when her short stories, essays and poems were published in the national magazines and newspapers in India. As a teenager, she was influenced by American writers like John Steinbeck, Fitzgerald, Hemingway and Faulkner. Her writings were greatly influenced by Salman Rushdie, Virginia Woolf, Toni Morrison, Jamaica Kincaid, Bob Dylan and Emily Dickinson. In 1982, she received her Bachelor's degree in Commerce from the University of Bombay. She joined the Rajendra Prasad Institute of Communications in Bombay for a diploma in Journalism in 1983. She received her M.A degree in Journalism from Ohio State University and earned her PhD in English in 1997 from Kent State University. She chose Twentieth-Century African American Literature for her doctorate. As a reporter, she had a career with the *Lorain Journal* and *Akron Beacon Journal*, and she penned for *The Washington Post*, *The Plain Dealer*, and still contributes from her table to *The Boston Globe's* book pages. She has contributed over 2000 articles to various newspapers and magazines. In 2002, she embarked on a teaching career at Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland. She is successful author of numerous novels – *Bombay Time* (2001), *The Space Between Us* (2006), *If Today Be Sweet* (2007), *The Weight of Heaven* (2009), *The World We Found* (2012), *The Story of Hour* (2014), *Everybody's Son* (2017), *The Secret Between Us* (2018) and *Honor* (2022). She is also the author of a memoir, *First Darling of the Morning* (2004). She has also written three youngsters' picture books- *When I Carried You in My Belly* (2017), *Sugar in Milk* (2020) and *Binny's Diwali* (2020). Her books have been translated into several dialects and were published in over fifteen countries. She is the recipient of the Nieman Fellowship to Harvard University, the Lambda Literary Award and the Seth Rosenberg Prize. Her much-acclaimed novel *The Space Between Us* reached the final for the

PEN/Beyond Margin Award. The work also became a BookSense Pick and a 'Book-of-the-month Selection' for the OPB book club. She won the Kiriyaama (Notable Book) Prize and became a finalist for the Northern Ohio Live Awards in 2006. Her work, *The Weight of Heaven*, won the Cleveland Arts Prize and was selected as one of the Best Fiction Books by the *Christian Science Monitor*. She used novels as a vehicle to express herself. Her works dealt with several themes such as friendship, race relations, mother-child bond, class division and social-cultural life of Parsis, immigration, cultural differences in India and America, life in Bombay, etc.

Bombay Time (2002) is the debut novel of Thrity Umrigar. The novel is a series of several stories unified. The action of the novel takes place in a single day, but the recollection shifts the temporal aspects between the present day and the Bombay of the 1960s and 70's. The novel unfolds the memories, dreams, betrayal, secrets, happy and sad moments of Parsi residents of Wadia Baug, one by one, who have gathered for the marriage of Mehernosh Kanga. Apart from the portrayal of several interpersonal relationships, the novel contains several instances of gender discrimination faced by female characters. Judith Butler (2011) in his book *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* asserts "gender is a repeated stylisation of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory framework that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being" (43-44). It is always said that gender is a matter of social construction, where some norms of society are particularised for males and females. Since childhood, children are trained by elders about what is suitable for a boy or a girl. In other words, with the birth of a sexed body, one is immediately installed with certain beliefs, codes, customs, etc. These roles are the fundamental traits in gender formation, which further give rise to gender discrimination. Gender discrimination not just hinders the growth of women but also threatens the lives of future generations. In this novel, when Coomi wanted to reverse the usual order of roles and wished to play the role of a policeman, her younger brother refused it, saying, "We cannot do that. . . because you are a girl... a girl can't be a policeman... It's my job to catch you. At home, she was served small portion "of meat with the fewest bones". At school, when she questioned her professor over an average grade, he taunted her for being so smart. He says, "What would I give my male students be as diligent as you are . . . Such a shame you will settle down any day now with your own family . . . Such a waste for a woman to be as smart as you are. She was hurt by his words. She realised that as a girl, her dreams were mere "a child's fantasy"

(Bombay Time, 2001, 87). Later, she herself observes the vital difference when she asserts for her husband, “Unlike her, Rusi had a plan to turn his dreams into reality. And unlike her, Rusi was a man” (88). With this thought, instead of chasing her dreams, she preferred to marry a “man with prospects and with the good manners and cultures... to marry above herself. She finds more intelligence to “perch a ride on the shoulder of a man” (87) who would pull her out of the lower-middle-class life. Her changed outlook shows the dependency of women on men, which further gives them the right to dominate women. “Women are discriminated from birth to the end of their lives. Though the post-modern age has changed the old concept of women’s subordination and subjugation, they are still forced to be servile despite their ability to lead their male partner” (Singh, 2011, 118). In the novel, Coomi is not the only female character to face the gender difference. Another one is Dosa Popat, an old widow, who went through a similar experience when she was a girl. Though she was the brightest student in her class, she was deprived of achieving higher education. She dreamt of being a teacher or a doctor – “the first Parsi woman doctor” but she realised that “ambition was more unattractive in a girl” (Bombay Times, 2001, 32). Her father, Minoo Framroze, puts marriage above her education and took the big decision of choosing Sohrab, her father’s friend’s son, as a groom for Dosa without even asking her. Although her mother, Shenaz Framroze, questioned his decision, “What is my daughter, a pair of shoes to be traded back and forth between two drunken idiots?” (33), it remained unchanged as he says before Dosa, “I’ve given Darius Uncle my words”. Gender roles are passed on and reinforced by different mechanisms within society. The society often expects one’s gender role to be as per one’s gender identity. Explicating the term ‘gender roles’, Silver Damsen (2011) writes that:

Gender Roles are the codes of behaviour that a society expects of one gender or another. These codes are learned in childhood. According to this theory, children see adults model gender appropriate behavior, and then their desire to be a member of that society impels them to accept the modelled behaviour as the best and most appropriate for themselves and others. Adopting and practising a “gender role” is therefore what helps an individual to construct a “gender identity” of who they are (40).

When the principal of her school makes an effort to change Minoo's decision, saying, “Your daughter has a great future ahead of her” (Bombay Time, 2001, 34), he simply replied, “My daughter is a woman... her husband can give her a life of comfort and ease. Minoo’s opinion reflects the mindset of a

typical patriarchal father for whom his words and Dosa’s marriage are above his daughter’s education, life and happiness. Patriarchy can be defined as a kind of society where supreme authority is vested in the hands of males, by which they subordinate women in several ways. Women remain subjugated and marginalised in a patriarchal society. Just to keep others happy, women generally make sacrifices, which is visible in this novel as well. For the sake of her family and her three younger sisters’ education, Dosa has to sacrifice her dreams. Her pain and grief can be noticed when she says to her sisters, “I suppose Daddy has made me the sacrificial lamb so that the three of you can build your lives on my broken back. Think of your poor sister when you are studying in a beautiful college library.

Tehmi Engineer, a sixty-three-year-old widow, lost her husband Cyrus very early after the marriage. She remembers how she and Cyrus (her husband) fell for each other at first sight and decides to get married. All other in the family welcomed their decision of getting marry except Cyrus’s father, Dali Engineer. He puts the reason that “he had never opposed his son’s choice of bride, just the alacrity with which his only son was willing to sacrifice his future as a lawyer to take up a mediocre job at Bombay Chemicals” (176). The young couple, anyhow manage to get married without the presence of Dali and Mani Engineer, Cyrus’s mother. Lois Tyson (2001), in his work *Critical Theory Today: A User-Friendly Guide*, writes that “women have internalised the norms and values of patriarchy, which privilege men by promoting traditional gender roles” (83). In the novel, we can notice that Mani was not very strictly opposing Cyrus’s decision, but as a submissive wife, she had to support her husband, and so she too did not attend the marriage of her son. Though the decision of getting married was jointly made by Tehmi and Cyrus, only Tehmi was blamed for destroying the career of Cyrus by Dali Engineer, as mentioned in the novel, he “subconsciously holds her responsible for his son’s detour from his destiny” (Bombay Time, 2001, 177). He is of the view that “if she’d have been from a different family... a family that valued education and culture” (178), she would have opposed Cyrus’s eagerness to leave his college and to marry her so early. Both the females of the house, Tehmi and Mani, made an effort to fill the gap between father and son, but the quarrel remained unsolved.

Thus, Thrity Umrigar, in her novel *Bombay Time*, through the female characters – Coomi, Dosa Popat, and Tehmi, has provided the readers with a realistic picture of women in a society where they are deprived of education, and their decisions and opinions are not valued. They experience

discrimination at every single step for being a woman and are subjugated in the name of traditions and patriarchy.

REFERENCES

1. Umrigar T. *Bombay time: A novel*. New York: Picador; 2001.
2. Singh SP. Women's search for identity in Manju Kapur's *Home*. In: Roy VK, editor. *Women's voices in Indian English fiction in English*. New Delhi: Adhyayam Publishers & Distribution; 2011.
3. Butler J. *Bodies that matter: On the discursive limits of sex*. UK: Routledge; 2011.
4. Sumi VS. Education and gender discrimination. *Women's human rights – A feminist discourse* (ERIC). 2012;7.
5. Tyson L. *Critical theory today: A user-friendly guide*. New York: Garland; 2001.
6. Damsen S. Gender. In: Jennifer MT, editor. *Encyclopedia of themes in literature*. New York: Infobase Publishing; 2011. p. 40-42.

Creative Commons (CC) License

This article is an open-access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY 4.0) license. This license permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.

CONFERENCE ORGANIZERS

- Desert Research Association (DRA), Headquarters – Jodhpur
 - Nehru Study Centre, Jai Narain Vyas University, Jodhpur
 - Government Girls College, Jhalamand (Jodhpur)
 - Department of Geography, Dr. Bhim Rao Ambedkar Government College, Sri Ganganagar
- In Collaboration with Kalinga University, Raipur (Chhattisgarh)

Disclaimer: The views, opinions, statements, and conclusions expressed in the papers, abstracts, presentations, and other scholarly contributions included in this conference are solely those of the respective authors. The organisers and publisher shall not be held responsible for any loss, harm, damage, or consequences — direct or indirect — arising from the use, application, or interpretation of any information, data, or findings published or presented in this conference. All responsibility for the originality, authenticity, ethical compliance, and correctness of the content lies entirely with the respective authors.