

Threads of Diversity: Weaving Cultures in Thrity Umrigar's *The Story Hour*

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Abstract:

Cultural pluralism is a situation in which a minority group maintains its distinct culture while participating in a society with a separate, dominant culture. Umrigar presented this cultural pluralism through her protagonist Lakshmi in the novel *The Story Hour*. Lakshmi, an immigrant woman who follows all the Indian traditional values in her settled country America. Lakshmi represented people who migrated due to various reasons but they always bound with their values and culture.

Keywords: Culture, Minority, Diaspora, Pluralism

Cultural pluralism is a form of cultural diversity in certain countries where cultures can still maintain their unique qualities and combine to form a larger richer whole. In many countries, including the United States, the term multiculturalism is used synonymously or in place of cultural pluralism. According to Newman (1973, p. 29), societies can range from those that are monistic (composed of one group) or dyadic (composed of two groups) to those that are pluralistic (composed of many groups). He goes on to point out that “societies that are customarily described as culturally pluralistic are those composed of numerous groups that, either by virtue of coalitions between minorities or on the basis of their own critical size, are able

to resist being lumped into an undifferentiated mass” (p. 29). Finally, Newman noted that “cultural pluralism may be expressed in the formula $A+B+C = A+B+C$, where A, B, and C represent different social groups that, over time, maintain their own unique identities” (p. 67). Stent, Hazard, and Rivlin (1973) provide a similar definition by proposing that:

Cultural pluralism is a state of equal co-existence in a mutually supportive relationship within the boundaries or framework of one nation of people of diverse cultures with significantly different patterns of belief, behavior, color, and in many cases with different languages. To achieve cultural pluralism, there must be unity with diversity. Each person must be aware of and secure in his own identity, and be willing to extend to others the same respect and rights that he expects to enjoy himself: (Rivlin, 14)

Thrity Umrigar is an Indian-American journalist, critic, and novelist. She was born in India and immigrated to United States in her 21. Umrigar is an accomplished, natural storyteller who remains an optimistic narrator despite all her grim plot twists, though she never softens the impact of the various tragedies on her characters. Her notable novel *The Space Between* illustrates the intimacy, and the irreconcilable class divide, between two women in contemporary Bombay.

Thrity Umrigar's novels deal with cultural aspects. Her debut novel *Bombay* Timeportrays the decline of Bombay, delivering an impressive debut offering a glimpse into a cultural world – especially that of the Parsis, an ethnic minority that most Westerners know only in its barest outlines. In *First Darling of the Morning* Umrigar alternates between sweet and biting accounts of her middle-class Parsi upbringing in 1960's and 1970's Bombay. She recalls

moments from her tumultuous childhood through her teenage years and finally into her early 20s when she leaves India for the U.S. *If Today Be Sweet*, the protagonist Tehmina Sethna is torn between two cultures that couldn't be more different: Bombay and Cleveland. *The Weight of Heaven* in this novel Umrigar continues her exploration of cultural divides in this beautifully written and incisive novel about an American couple's experience in India. *World We Found* portrays India's national identity crisis over the past 40 years through four friends who reconnected in this absorbing novel. *The Story Hour* is a deeply moving portrait of connection, disconnection, and missed connections set in an unnamed Northeastern University City. *Everybody's Son* is about a nine-year-old Anton first enters foster care, he still believes his mother is coming back for him. *The Space Between Us*. This splendid tale should appeal to all readers with open hearts, regardless of their familiarity with the culture of Mumbai.

Thrity Umrigar in her novel *The Story Hour* depicts the cultural pluralism through her characters. Lakshmi, the protagonist moved to America due to her marriage with Adit Patel who runs a restaurant over there. She moved from India to a far place but she never ever fails to carry her culture and values with her. Lakshmi comes from a feudal society where she is surrounded by people who share every aspect of their lives with each other. She herself has also played the role of caregiver and counselor to many. It is portrayed throughout the novel with many incidents. Every morning Adit Patel, Lakshmi's husband lights a diya and says the prayers before they start their work. In the cash tray they have small statues of Krishna, Hanuman, and statue of the Goddess Lakshmi are known as Indian Gods. One of her regular customer Bobby informed that he is moving to California which hurts Lakshmi but as an Indian woman she gave farewell with a gift of Goddess Lakshmi's statue. The Indian people never allow anyone go in empty hand while they say goodbye. When Lakshmi attempted for suicide the reason behind that was

her loneliness. People in India never are alone. Indians are always in a group so Lakshmi felt lonely and desperate in the big city. “- Half year, no lead living on trees... you brings me to this upside – down place and set men in corner like old suitcase ” (Umrigar, 40). When she was admitted for treatment she met the psychiatrist named Maggie, who married to an Indian named Sudhir. He was an Indian male from a conservative Brahmin family who was raised to be courteous to all, to be respectful and protective of women, who was cautious by instinct and precise by training. Sudhir prefers Indian food and movies while in Cedarville. He goes to Indian shops to buy groceries. Sudhir’s hospitality, the casual ease with which he opened up his home to his friends and their friends, his generosity in feeding whoever wandered in, the commune-like atmosphere that he created, spoke powerfully to Maggie. Sudhir is with the brand of his Indian hospitality in America. Maggie realized that the hospitality he displayed to all guests was larger than her was- it was cultural, hereditary, something coded into his DNA. Lakshmi was asked by Maggie whether Lakshmi is homesick the answer was no “My home here, with my husband. I married woman” (Umrigar 58). It reflected the mindset and culture of an Indian married woman. Indians are also nature lovers. Lakshmi relaxed visibly as soon as they entered the woods. She plucked a leaf off a tree, crushed it in her hand, inhaled its smell, and then said its name in her language; she got down on her haunches to examine a mushroom growing at the base of a trunk; she turned her radiant face up to gaze at the sliver of sky that showed through the leaves. She felt as if these woods were magical, and that they had transformed the sullen, crushed woman into pixie. Umrigar portrays Indian culture through even sob. When Lakshmi cries out Maggie felt it was cultural because Maggie attended Sudhir’s grandfather’s funeral in India, where his widow had wailed and beaten her chest; she’d seen

videos of Middle Eastern women keening during mass funerals; in Lakshmi's crying was the sound you would make if you were the last person left alive on the entire planet.

Indian people never feel comfort out of their houses and places. It demonstrated in the novel through Lakshmi, when she was discharged from the hospital she felt happy because she is going to her own house and store. Once she gets home, she will eat food when she wants, open one, two three windows if she wants, go for walk if husband says okay. Nobody come in during night to ask her question or give her tablet. She can take shower with her Hamam soap, not the little soap they given in the hospital. She can play Mukesh and Kishore Kumar music CD when she wants, she can drink her own chai and not the hospital tea. She can hear her husband's snoring. In our religion suicide is a big sin and she thinks everyone can look at her face and say a "fallen woman" (Umrigar, 70). Lakshmi carried a very big luggage when she went to Maggie's house for the first time. "What was it about immigrants that they always had to carry around half their possessions?" (Umrigar, 76). Umrigar gave much importance to even the objects used by the Indians. Maggie immediately recognized the metal box as a tiffin carrier; Lakshmi carried fresh food for the couple as a token of her love and gratitude. Maggie knew about Indians because she has visited India many times with her husband. She had never met and Indian who could accept a favor without needing to repay it immediately. They are good at feeding others too. Maggie regrets to get the food from Lakshmi as a gift and she said "I can't accept gifts from my patients" (Umrigar, 77). Lakshmi informed that in her village, people gave gift to the doctors. When her sister Shilpa was born, her father gave the doctor a big bag of rice. When these two people converse Lakshmi involves when Maggie, the foreigner talks or enquires about India or Indians. Maggie would like to treat Lakshmi as her patient but she always treat the doctor as her friend. Maggie at last come to a conclusion that friendship was the best therapy she could offer

Lakshmi, she thought. Lakshmi is a typical Indian woman who sees everything through his eyes-moon, sun, sky, tree, parking lot, store everything. Though she was uprooted from India she follows all the rituals and values. She never eats beef because in her religion it is restricted. Also people from India can be controlled by friendship rather than order. Maggie became the friend and well-wisher of Lakshmi. She always encourages her that she is not ugly, she is a great cook, she can go to night school to learn the proper English. When Lakshmi met Sudhir for the first time she was afraid to speak with him on the street in America, which shows the nature of an Indian woman. When Sudhir would like to give his hand for shake, she folds her hands, like proper Indian wife. As she moved to America she never forgets to grow tomatoes, cilantro and all small plants in pots. People in India do and fulfill their household needs through planting plants like this. Lakshmi depicts the picture of an Indian mother through her mother as well. She reminds her mother whenever she eats mango. Her mother never eats mango fruit. She only suck the big seed the soft, sweet fruit part, she gave to her children. The best part of the mango the children get. What were left for the mother were the rthritis and the pain and the hungriness. And this made her happy. Because that what it meaning to be a mother. When Lakshmi talked about her mother to Maggie, she too filled with tears in her eyes. Lakshmi explained that we often feel that we miss the dead one. It is because dead people need to know we still remain them. Otherwise they feel alone, thinking that we forget them. That's why God gives us missing feeling in our heart to keep them company. Lakshmi in America following or remembering Indian myth and discussed that with her foreign friend is the typical example. India could be divided by language, religion, region, class, caste, and education but in America, all the differences paled under the imperative of their brown skin. The tenuous links they shared a love

for Hindi film music, a passion for Indian cooking carried so much more weight here than they would back home.

Umrigar beautifully differentiate Indian culture with American. In India every emotion was exaggerated, every action was melodramatic. Desperate love, mad obsessions, outbursts of rage, bizarre self-sacrifice, self-immolation. Young women eating rat poison, jumping off buildings, or burning themselves alive. Young men throwing themselves onto railroad tracks in the path of oncoming trains. It was as if they didn't value their bodies at all. And all this self-destruction over issues that in the West would be solved by a simple elopement or estrangement from one's parents or a move to a different city. Lakshmi had come to Maggie with this confession because she needed absolution. Sudhir is unassuming, decent, non-flashy, but he will stay and put his shoulder to the wheel and continue doing what he does so well by teaching generations of young students, inspiring them, picking them up when they fall. Lakshmi often compares incidents with her native place. "I walk fast, so leaf behind the ugly words husband say to me yesterday. They flying loose in my mind, like kites during the Makar Sankranti festival"(300). In summary, cultural pluralism is an issue which will remain central for many years to come and there is a great need for more cross-cultural studies to form the basis of the cultural pluralism movement. As pointed out by Berry (1997):

All contemporary societies are now culturally plural. There are no longer any societies that can claim to be homogeneous with respect to objective cultural markers (such as ethnic origin, language, and religion) or subjective indicators (such as one's ethnic identity or personal expressions of one's culture). Such diversity elicits a variety of responses at a number of levels: national societies, institutions, and individuals can celebrate or deny it: they can share it or isolate it:

they can accommodate it or attempt to squash it. Whatever the attitude or course of action, however, both history and contemporary experience provide compelling evidence that cultural pluralism is durable, even if its forms and expressions evolve over time. . . . (Berry, 17)

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