

A Postmodernist Reading of the Cityscape in the Select Novels of Thrity Umrigar

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Abstract

The focus of this paper is a postmodern interpretation of city life in selected novels written by Thrity Umrigar. The novels in question are *The Secret Between Us* and *The World We Found*, both set in Bombay (now Mumbai), a busy Indian metropolis. Through a postmodern lens, the paper examines how Umrigar represents the city and how these representations reflect themes such as fragmentation, cultural hybridity, and urban displacement. These novels use Bombay as a backdrop against which the characters' lives unfold, reflecting the complexities of contemporary urban existence in a globalized world. By analyzing narrative techniques, character interactions, and thematic elements, this paper aims to gain insight into how Umrigar's narrative aligns with postmodernism; this paper shows perspective on Mumbai's role in shaping characters' identities.

Keywords: Cityscape, Postmodern, Cosmopolitan, Urbanization, Mumbai, Globalization.

The postmodern era is heavily influenced by industrialization and urbanization, which results in cities continually changing. People are increasingly drawn to Western culture, leading to urban displacement, one of the major themes of postmodern interpretations of the city. Mumbai, formerly known as Bombay, is a cosmopolitan city that accommodates a vast number of migrants. Although it was once called Bombay during the British colonial period, it was renamed Mumbai in 1995 by Shiv Sena to honor the goddess *Mumbadevi*. However, some people still refer to it as Bombay. This paper examines Mumbai as a postmodern city through the lens of literature and explores various postmodern themes. It also delves into how postmodernism affects people's lives, not just physically but also mentally and psychologically. While some changes have brought positive outcomes and made people's lives more comfortable, others have caused emotional damage. India was once an orthodox country, but the postmodern era has brought about positive changes while also posing challenges such as emotional damage, increasing economic disparity, and feelings of loneliness.

Thrity Umrigar, an Indo-American writer born in Bombay (now Mumbai), portrays a modern Bombay (now Mumbai) through her writing. Her novels, *The World We Found* and *The Secret Between Us*, are set in Bombay (now Mumbai) and explore postmodern themes such as urbanization, identity, memory, and narrative structure. This article will examine different aspects of the postmodern reading of city life through selected novels of Thrity Umrigar.

Discussion

One of the themes of postmodernism is multiple narratives, which is evident in Umrigar's novels. The story is not merely centered around one character, but we can see the interplay of multiple characters throughout the novel. For example, *The World We Found* is the story of four friends studying at the same university in Bombay (now Mumbai), but after many years, they lost touch and were busy with their own lives. One of these four friends, Armaiti, has cancer, and as her last wish, she wants to reunite with her friends. However, more than 25 years have passed, and their lives have taken different paths. The postmodern theme of multiple narratives is shown in this novel because the story is not centered on only one character; Umrigar uses multiple narratives. Also, the novel *The Secret Between Us* does not focus on a single character. It is about the story of two old poor ladies, Bhima and Parvati, who started a business together and shared their secrets, which they never thought they would share with anyone in life. The novel also introduces many other characters, each with their own unique identity. Some minor characters are skipped, but the reader can explore many characters with their own stories, and the reader can view the story from everyone's point of view.

This approach is similar to Umrigar's novel, *The World We Found*, where the readers can see the different lifestyles of four friends who are now in different places. The novel is divided into 27 parts, and in each part, the author continues the story with every character through multiple narratives. The readers learn what is happening with each character, including what is going through their minds. In the second novel, *The Secret Between Us*, Umrigar represents her story by introducing Bhima first and then Parvati, and as the story progresses, they become friends and start a new business. This theme of multiple narratives is justified through Umrigar's concept of storytelling. It can be related to the Rasa theory, where emotions are used to depict the emotions of various characters through art. This idea is also known as Bhavas, which explores multiple emotions. For instance, the readers can observe different emotions in characters through the incidents that occur. As previously mentioned, novels are divided into parts. In each part, the writer continues the story by expressing different characters' feelings and thoughts at that time, such as guilt, happiness, sadness, satisfaction, etc.

In the first part of the story of *The World We Found*, Laleh's perspective is seen. She receives a call from Armaiti, her old friend who is suffering from cancer and will soon pass away. We witness Laleh's emotions as she hears this news.

“An uncharacteristic acceptance descended upon Laleh, in contrast to the denial she had felt since Armaiti called with news about her cancer. Then, she had felt like a wild animal, lassoed by the tyranny of the telephone cord. No, no, no, she had shaken her head as she got off the phone.” (Umrigar, 2012, pp1).

In her writing, Umrigar skillfully evokes emotions and beautifully justifies the sadness in Laleh's mind. Part two of the novel explores Armaiti's fear of death while showing her attempt to appear unaffected. Despite refusing treatment and accepting her eventual death, she still has a desire to live. In the following parts, Kavita and Laleh visit Nishta's home and feel a sense of nostalgia for the old days. Part four focuses on Adish's visit to Bhika Behram, where he finds peace and satisfaction. Umrigar dexterously employs the theory of Rasa to evoke different emotions in her novel *The World We Found*. The story is not centered on one character, allowing readers to experience different perspectives.

Edward Soja's theory of Spatial justice in cities talks about space and space being socially produced by human beings. Therefore, changes happen in society. This theory can be related to the postmodern reading of the city in the theme of urban fragmentation, a common feature of postmodern cities, and refers to the breakdown of social and cultural connections within different areas of the city. This is particularly evident in urban areas, as opposed to rural areas, where people tend to have more shared experiences. Thrity Umrigar's novel, set in Bombay (now Mumbai), does an excellent job of illustrating this phenomenon. In cities, class differences are stark, and poverty can be especially pronounced. Bhima, a maid in a poor neighborhood, works for a wealthy family in an affluent area. When she returns home, she feels the contrast in living standards acutely. Bhima feels that her granddaughter Maya, whom she sees attending college and fitting in with her peers, is not suited for their impoverished surroundings. This underscores the significant impact of urban fragmentation on those living in the same city.

On the other hand, Bombay (now Mumbai) is a city where people come to live, whether for study or financial reasons. Day by day, the city's culture is becoming more fragmented in different ways, making it increasingly cosmopolitan. Due to these changes, urban areas have become more divided.

In cities, we also see cultural differences based on caste and religion. These differences are often visible in different areas of the city. For example, in Umrigar's novel *The World We Found*, Nishta, one of the main characters, marries a Muslim man. After the 1930 riots in Bombay (now Mumbai), the Muslim community faced discrimination from Hindus, causing Iqbal's mentality to change drastically. As a result, they left their own house and moved to a Muslim area. In every city, there are different areas for different religions, and past issues often cause hostility between them. These city areas are very different, such as the Muslim area of Bombay (now Mumbai) Mahani Manzil. When Laleh and Kavita went to find Nishta, they entered the Muslim area and were told about the area by their driver.

“This is an all-Muslim area, memsahib. Be careful”

“what does it have to do with anything, Bhai?” Laleh felt compelled to say.

The old man looked at her as if they were sharing a secret. “cannot trust these beef-eaters, memsahib.”

They paid the man and exited the cab hastily. Laleh shook her head. "A country of bigots. That is what we are," she said. (Umrigar,2012, pp52).

This conversation shows us how, in different religions, people think of each other. Also, in this story, we meet Adish, a Parsi character who frequently visits the Bhika Behram well in Bombay (now Mumbai) for prayer and solace. The novel portrays how the city is divided into distinct cultural and societal areas. Urban fragmentation is a central theme in postmodern readings of the city. Umrigar effectively demonstrates this through her depiction of the local *Basti* and the grand flats at Cuffe Parade, as well as Muslim and Parsi religious sites. These different areas significantly impact the lives of people, resulting in fragmentation.

The mixing of cultures after the colonial period gave birth to a hybrid identity. It rapidly spread in Indian cities, which resulted in the creation of a third identity that is a blend of two different cultures or things, taking many forms like cultural, racial, linguistic, and so on. The term hybridity is mainly associated with Homi Bhabha's works. He calls all cultures and systems constructed in space. "Third Space of Enunciation" and cultural identity are always shaped by the spaces in which they emerge. Thus, purity in culture is rare. We should also consider that this is because of the colonial period or Western cultural influence. In a city like Bombay (now Mumbai), we can see this hybrid identity in the people. It is essential to consider the cultural fusion resulting from migration and globalization as well. As cities rapidly develop, we observe a diverse range of cultures coexisting. Bombay (now Mumbai) is recognized as a cosmopolitan city. The novel *The World We Found* by Umrigar showcases the blending of cultures. The characters Adish and Laleh come from different religions but still marry. Additionally, Nishta, a Hindu woman, marries Iqbal, a Muslim man, and adopts Muslim customs, such as wearing a *burka*. This illustrates how people from different places and cultures adapt and integrate into new environments, leading to mixed identities for future generations.

The city's diverse cultures have led to a shift in acceptable behavior. Some things that were once frowned upon are now standard for the citizens, while others are still not accepted. In postmodern literature, writers address controversial topics such as lesbianism in a positive light. Although many people in India do not accept this, writers acknowledge there is nothing wrong with it as long as it does not harm anyone. In *The Secret Between Us*, Chitra is a character who is in a relationship with Serabai, and when her maid Bhima discovers their relationship, she initially disapproves. However, over time, Bhima accepts their relationship, although society continues to treat them rudely. These kinds of topics are now being openly discussed and celebrated by postmodern writers, which is one of the chief characteristics of their work. Sharing these stories helps to promote acceptance, understanding, and inclusiveness.

How the daily lives of people were structured and how the urban environment and capitalist society influenced them is explained in Henri Lefebvre's *Critique of Everyday Life*. He argued that this does not affect or shape only economic or political changes in society but deeply affects ordinary people's daily lives, relationships, and experiences of time and space. This work provides a significant perspective on the urban environment; this view can help

analyze a postmodern reading and urban environment. This highlights the influence of modernism and urban displacement, so in this way, we can relate one of the major themes of postmodern reading of the city, which is urban displacement; this mainly happens after colonialism, when many people migrated to one city after another, either for study work or another reason. Bombay (now Mumbai) is known for a large number of outsiders in the city; these migrated people have to adapt to a new lifestyle and have to accept mental and physical displacement, which is essential for living in a different city.

Unfortunately, some outsider is treated very severely by natives. In the novel *The Secret Between Us* by Thrity Umrigar, a gang in Bombay (now Mumbai) takes advantage of their power and treats the outsiders poorly. They demand *hafta* from people in exchange for doing business in the city and will harm those who oppose them. This is a common issue in Bombay (now Mumbai), a modern city in India with a high crime rate. Criminals and gangs attempt to rule the city and often discriminate against outsiders. In the novel, we see how outsiders are treated, such as the instance when Bibi's husband Ram was killed by gangs just because they were seen as outsiders. This highlights the displacement in the cities.

"It was those Maharashtra-for-Maharashtrian thugs, mausi," he says. "They are going around the city destroying businesses of non-Maharashtrians. Cabdrivers, vendors, anyone who is a migrant from the North; they are beating up only."(Umrigar, 2018, pp57).

It is unfair for outsiders to feel unsafe in the city due to gangs and exclusion. Simply because someone is not from the area, they often encounter numerous obstacles and may still not be safe from harm. Leaving their original city and feeling neglected in the new one has proven detrimental. Displacement can have adverse effects on individuals.

On the other hand, we have characters like Bhima and Parvati who hail from the village. Bhima's entire family, including her husband and son, still reside there and own land. However, due to issues in their relationship, Bhima had to move to Bombay (now Mumbai) with only her granddaughter for company. Living in the city was a struggle for her as she often felt out of place. Despite facing numerous challenges and neglect, she eventually managed to survive. Ultimately, she reunites with her family and discovers her true identity. Parvati, too, was from the village, and her final wish was to have her ashes scattered in the river there. Bhima refers to Parvati's village as *muluk*, a term that highlights the Indo-American writer's ability to evoke a sense of Indianness through her writing.

"Tonight, Bhima gestures toward the urn and the bag. "we should go to her milk," she says, tears a piece of chapati, and scoops up the spinach from her plate. "Sprinkle the ashes, like she asks. Before you begin college again."(Umrigar, 2018, pp326).

The word *muluk*, as employed by Bhima, conveys a feeling of personal identity, highlighting the theme of displacement. This refers to the experience of urban displacement,

where individuals from another city must adjust to a new physical and mental space. In her writing, Umrigar skillfully employs grand narration to represent the story excellently. She uses native words of Maharashtra or Indian words directly connected with Indian readers. This makes her story more compelling.

Conclusion

The postmodern perspective on the city focuses on globalization and urban transformation. It highlights the effects of language and narrative in shaping our perception of urban spaces. Umrigar's literary works showcase the complexities of Indian cities, which were once shaped by colonial forces and now face challenges due to globalization. Through a postmodern lens, Umrigar offers a rich context for examining the impact of globalization on urban transformation. Her works address cultural hybridity, displacements, language, identity, and representation in the rapidly changing urban landscapes of India. By exploring these themes, Umrigar provides insight into how globalization is reshaping India's diverse and dynamic urban centers, presenting both opportunities and challenges for their residents.

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