

# Patriarchal Subjugation of Sera Dubash in Thrity Umrigar's novel *The Space Between Us*

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**Abstract:** Patriarchy is defined as a system in which the power is primarily held by the male member of the family. In words of Gerda Lerner, Patriarchy implies, “men hold power in all important institutions of society” (239). It is more often used as a tool to subjugate women in a society. The women writers have depicted the violence and oppression faced by women in a male dominated society in their creative works. This paper attempts to explore the patriarchal subjugation of the female character- Sera Dubash in Thrity Umrigar's novel *The Space Between Us*.

**Keywords:** Hegemony, Patriarchy, Violence, Thrity Umrigar.

## INTRODUCTION

The word ‘Patriarchy’ means the rule of the father or chief over the women and the other subordinate male in the family. Kamala Bhasin in her work *What is Patriarchy?* define it “as a social system in which males have complete power in the economic, social and political arena, and has designated gender roles which are appropriate to these arrangements.” (3). Patriarchy automatically privileges men over women such that they have very little or no choice to claims to material, sexual and intellectual resources of the society. In the patriarchal society women struggles to make choices in any aspect of life. It was further used to exploit and oppress women to keep patriarchy intact. The term is closely tied with Hegemony. The term ‘Hegemony’ is derived from the Greek word “egemonia” which means leadership or rule. The term ‘Hegemony’ was coined and popularized by Antonio Gramsci, an Italian Communist thinker, activist and political leader who defined it in a Marxist sense as a form of control exercised by a dominant class or group by controlling the means of production. This domination is not necessarily through violence but by winning the consent over whom they are ruling. According to N. Urbinati, “A subject's entire metamorphosis into imprisonment inside an environment is referred to as hegemony” (370). The women writers have boldly depicted in their fictional writings about how women are oppressed

in a patriarchal society. One such writer is Thrity Umrigar.

Thrity Umrigar, an Indian-American journalist, critic and writer was born in 1961 in Mumbai, India in a traditional middle-class Parsi family to Noshir Umrigar and Ketty Umrigar. She did her schooling from Catholic school and received her Bachelor degree in 1982. She relocated to the United States of America at the age of twenty-one. 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 has contributed over 2000 articles in various newspapers and magazines. In 2002, she traversed a teaching profession at Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland. This prolific writer has several novels to her credit – *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 has also written a memoir, *First Darling of the Morning*. Her books have been translated into several languages and were published in over fifteen countries. She is the recipient of Niemen Fellowship to Harvard University, Lambda Literary Award and the Seth Rosenberg Prize. Her works envelop several themes such as friendship, race relation, mother-child bond, class division and social-cultural life of Parsis, immigration, cultural difference in India and America, life in Bombay, etc.

## ANALYSIS

*The Space Between Us* is her much acclaimed novel which reached the finalist 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 Kiriya (Notable Book) Prize, and became the finalist for Northern Ohio Live Awards in 2006. It is the story of two women namely Sera Dubash and Bhima, who are though separated by class and religion but they share an

emotional bond somehow. It reflects the impact of patriarchy and hegemony on the life of Sera Dubash.

Sera Dubash, a rich Parsi widow woman is presented before the readers as a “loyal friend, loving mother, benevolent employer, helpful neighbor, generous patron of arts” (*The Space Between Us* 51). The happier the life she is living with her daughter Dinaz and her son-in-law, Viraf, the more she had suffered in her own married life as mentioned in the novel, “So many burdens this poor body is carrying. So much unhappiness” (109). Sera as a young unmarried girl was habitual to a cultured and elitist lifestyle. She had spent her evenings “at Homi Bhabha Auditorium in the company of cultured, dignified men” (167). Her father was an eminent scientist. He was always lovable and peaceful with her mother, Jeroo. Watching the happy married life of her parents, Sera too hold the opinion regarding marriage as “something finer, deeper, a marriage made out of silk and velvet . . . of cloud and stardust and red earth and ocean foam and moonlight . . . passion and kindness” (89) but all her ideals regarding marriage got shattered after her wedding with Feroz Dubash. Sera remember him as a “husband and oppressor . . . tormentor . . . victimizer . . . aggressive, brilliant, violent, jealous” (260). She supposed him as a “gallant, courteous, loving” (16) man but Feroz turned out to be a typical Parsi patriarchal husband.

After marriage Sera realized how Feroz dominates over her in every matter of life. Sera, “an idealistic, hopeful girl” (51) with “successful job, a good life” gave up her job at “Bombay House” (78) and turned into a stereotype housewife, a docile, defenseless wife who follow all the atrocities of her husband and her mother-in-law for the sake of family and society. The male domination in a woman’s life is a natural phenomenon in a patriarchal society. Subjugation of women occurs in many forms like abuse, physical violence, psychological, economical, etc. The act of violence against women is perceived as an essential for maintaining the authority and superiority of men within the family. In words of Robert Paul Wolf, “Violence is the illegitimate or unauthorized use of force to effect the decisions against the will or desires of others” (606). By force of violence, women are deprived and discriminated at the hand patriarchy and matrimony. Man has achieved the authority of dominance and power over woman through the historical privileges and woman has the compulsion to adopt the male-constructed power

control system. R.J. Kalpana in her article entitled “Phallic Reflections” asserts, “In most simplified form, violence is defined as abuse and it takes on many guises, from physical assault to psychological domination to social subjection to cultural oppression” (68). Sera experienced Feroz’s violent behaviour very early after three months of their marriage when he falsely accused her for flirting with waiter. The accusation left her “speechless” (*The Space Between Us* 165) and when she reacted aggressively, Feroz not only arrogantly ordered her to keep her voice down but also hit her hard. In words of Sera, “[t]he pain was so sharp that she felt nauseated, so even while she cradled her right arm with her left hand, she drew her hurt arm over her stomach to control the nausea”. Sera got so frightened that she tried to run away from that “darkman” but she stopped thinking that “[t]his was her husband, the man she had married only three months ago, the one to whom she had pledged her future” (166). She realized that “she had no defenses, no strategies to protect herself from Feroz” (167). It did not end with this as he later began to enjoy the physical assault on Sera. As she recalls, “How sometimes it was just an appetizer – a quick but hard punch, his thumb and index finger in a scissor like grip that pulled at her flesh and made it ache days later. How, at other times, it was a full-course meal, a banquet that includes punches, slaps, and an occasional kick – a meal that left her so full she had spent hours the next day deciding which long-sleeved dress to wear and how to explain the bruises on her face” (189). He “like a man possessed” began to subdue her passivity by beating her and using words like “Today you went too far . . . Today, you deserve what you got. Your damn pride, your arrogance – you’re ballbuster, not a woman at all, you know that?” (105) . Initially he begged for forgiveness saying, “It’s just that I love you so much, I can’t bear the thought of losing you” (167) but with the time he stopped feeling any guilty for his actions and words. Sera “kept waiting for Feroz to apologize by mail or phone, to acknowledge her pain, to inquire about her bruised body” (*The Space Between Us* 107) but it never occurred instead “there was simply the drought of silence and distance” (107). Sera as submissive wife hide every bruises of her body from the family and society.

The institution of patriarchy cannot survive without the support of others. To keep control over women, men get the support of women only. The novel also

reflects that how women adds to the suffering of other women. In this novel, Banu, Feroz's mother can be seen supporting her son's every wrong action. She herself dominates and tries to be head and shoulder above Sera. Banu's emotional control over Feroz creates a deep difference in the married life of Sera and Feroz. Banu applies every trick to prove her superiority in the house and in the life of Feroz. For Sera, her mother-in-law adds to her misery. Her hegemonic attitude can be noticed in the words of Sera that "Banu had three extra eyes bored into the back of her head" (47). She cannot hide anything as "Banu always seemed to know exactly what had transpired in their room" (47). Banu even manipulates her son's mind in a way that "his face was a mask" (79). Further She used the old, orthodox rites and rituals which were followed during the menstruation as a tool to subjugate Sera. When Sera enters the living room unintentionally during her menstruation, Banu reacted in a hysterical manner, "Out, Out, . . . Acchut. Unclean girl, dirtified the whole room while I was praying. All my prayers are ruined by your unclean presence" (75) . . . Oh God, what kind of daakan has entered my house, to make me miserable in my old age?" (76). When Feroz returned from office, Banu herself became victim and emotionally blackmailed him saying, "if you want to kill your old mother, you shouldn't just delivered me to the Tower of Silence on your wedding day. Then, I wouldn't have to die this slow-slow death" (79). After few days Sera again committed a sin in Banu's eyes by entering the kitchen without purifying herself by washing "from top to bottom". Banu purified the whole house with the holy ashes brought from the Fire Temple. Sera was so much mentally harassed that she turned into neurotic, "she laughed until tears were rolled down her cheeks. She heard sounds emerging from her mouth, sounds . . . sobs or laughter". Even in this condition Banu does not feel any pity for Sera, else in anger her "hand shot out and slapped her cheeks". Later she justified her action saying, "I'm innocent . . . I just shook you, to get you out of your hysteria" (81).

#### CONCLUSION

The character of Sera Dubash presents the pragmatic image of Indian society where women are expected to play a subservient role in a male dominated society. They suffer both physically and psychologically in the hands of husband and in-laws.

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