

RECLAIMING THE SPACE WITHIN The Resilience, Resolution, and Resistance of Women in Constrained Shared Spaces

Patricia Santos, RJM[♦]

India

Abstract

The world of Indian women on the margins encompasses multiple conflicting spaces which result in bonding or brokenness, parity or inequality, vulnerability and oppression. The decision to be either overpowered by conflicting intersecting spaces or to break free from their clutches requires resilience, resolution and resistance. We see this dilemma unfold in Thrity Umrigar's novel *The Space Between Us*, revealing the intricacies involved in shared spaces at diverse levels, in all cultures and in all religions. Bhima, a faithful and hardworking domestic maid, is torn between problems in her own family and the difficulties she encounters in the home where she is employed. In moments of crises, class and caste bonds hold stronger than faithful but unequal ties of friendship. No matter how hard we try to bridge the spaces, we realize that there will always be some crevices, some spots and some uneven terrain. The article first looks at varied understandings of space. It then explores the multiple spaces between people and their implications. Finally, it acknowledges the strength of women who, heeding the divine or prophetic voice, can go beyond the barriers of social, cultural and religious stratifications, negotiating the spaces between to reclaim the core space within.

Keywords: Domestic Work, Patriarchal Power, Prophetic Vocation, Socio-Cultural Stratifications, Space, Women at the Margins

[♦]Patricia Santos RJM is a doctoral researcher at the Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies, at KU Leuven, Belgium. Prior to this she was a lecturer of Theology at *Jnana-Deepa Vidyapeeth* (JDV), Pontifical Institute for the Study of Philosophy and Religion, Pune, India. She is a member of the Indian Theological Association (ITA), Indian Women Theological Forum (IWTF), and Conference of Catholic Psychologists of India (CCPI). Her academic interests include women and gender studies, psychology, spirituality, liberation and feminist theologies. Email: patriciarjm@gmail.com

1. Space as a Dynamic Concept

The concept of space is abstract, elusive and all-pervading. Space is neither static nor limited to a place, location or position. Doreen Massey, a British scientist and geographer, sees space in the multiple interactions in interrelations which coexist over a period of time.¹ The social dimension of space comprises of varied interwoven stories of equal or unequal relations. Through the interaction with other stories one's story could be altered or get new meaning. While space can be understood in varied ways, it affects persons physically, emotionally, socially, and spiritually. Although globalization envisions space as *unstructured, unbounded, unfettered mobility*, it reveals in reality the dynamics of power and control with the exclusion of some. With mobility and shifting there is the *thrown togetherness of place* which brings about the "unavoidable challenge of negotiating a here-and-now."² 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. Difference and diversity which are evident in common connected spaces can be enriching or challenging calling for varied responses. Diversity demands openness — to be willing to enter into an alternate space and to listen to another story.

In the urban cities of India one can observe marked differences with regard to space, place, and culture. The vast dense stretches of existing slums expose the entrenched poverty, inequality, and discrimination that continue to exist alongside rich skyscrapers and elite apartments. During her 26-day project in Mumbai, Onikepe Owolabi, a young Nigerian doctor, observed the wide disparity in the vibrant city with its tall buildings and crowded streets exhibiting enormous growth and development, along with the abject poverty of the shanties and slums existing side by side.³ In her blog she writes:

Amidst Bombay's entire splendor, beside service apartment blocks, on pavements outside the beautiful Taj hotel there are makeshift structures of cardboard and rubber sheets. In larger areas, these materials are mixed

¹Doreen Massey, *For Space*, London; California; New Delhi: Sage Publications Ltd, 2008, 9.

²Doreen Massey, *For Space*, 140.

³Onikepe Owolabi, "Catalyzing Change in the Slums of Bombay," *Ashoka Innovators for the Public*, 2010, <https://www.ashoka.org/story/catalyzing-change-slums-bombay>.

with cement and roofing sheets — characteristic slum building things. And everywhere I've visited they exist. Sprawling unplanned slum communities, from the Dharavi of movie fame to smaller growing ones which seem to grow like weeds wherever space exists, account for almost half (statistics say) of this city's housing. And visiting them, talking with the people who live there, and seeing their health statistics all scream of unmet need! Countless women who can't access health care, scrawny visibly malnourished kids, no electricity, one source of water for 10,000 households... the baseline data on these communities are alarming and the experience when you visit much more.⁴

While there are marked differences in housing and lifestyle within territorial urban physical spaces, there is also the formation of different types of communities within the dense slum areas. Women are most affected by the interplay of social, economic, structural and psychological factors arising in these places. These factors lend themselves to either displacement or bonding, disintegration or networking, distance or intimacy. The complex and wide range of stressors that affect the mental and physical health of women are often unacknowledged and get repressed, leading to further distress. Though the status of women is positively changing in India, the poor continue to be oppressed and shunned, used and abused as objects of scorn, robbed of their human dignity and worth.

2. Exploring the Spaces that Exist Between Persons

As women are offered more opportunities for education and employment they are entering the work force and so have to rely on domestic help for menial work and household chores. Since domestic work does not require any specific training or education, impoverished illiterate women are often employed for lower wages on contractual or daily wage basis. Because of the informal nature of their work, the contracts of domestic workers can be terminated at any time. There are no strict rules regarding their kind of work, vacation, overtime bonuses and other matters.⁵ Domestic work, while providing women a means of livelihood to support their families, replicates to some extent the colonial relations of domination and servitude. There may be situations where domestic workers enjoy good relationships with their employers, yet even in these common spaces, socio-cultural conditioning and family status can create rifts

⁴Onikepe Owolabi, "Catalyzing Change in the Slums of Bombay."

⁵Cf. "National Domestic Workers Movement," accessed July 18, 2016, <http://ndwm.org/>

and ruptures as evident in the relationship of the two main characters of Thrity Umrigar's novel *The Space between Us*.

Umrigar in her narrative skilfully portrays the interplay of class, gender and religious roles in the spaces shared by two divergent families in contemporary Mumbai. The narrative highlights the complexities of the different spaces shared by Sera the employer and her domestic maid Bhima; between Sera and her daughter Dinaz; between Sera and her husband Feroz; between Bhima and her husband Gopal; between Bhima and her granddaughter Maya; between Bhima and Viraf, the son-in-law of her employer; and finally between Bhima and an unnamed balloon seller.

Sera, a middle class Parsee woman employs Bhima, a Hindu woman living in one of the slums as her domestic worker. These two main women characters in the novel have contrasting lifestyles and are entangled in their respective familial webs; yet they share a domestic space that is energizing and unifying. Despite their differences, they are able to communicate deeply and reach out to each other in compassion, which enables them to bear the pain of their broken marriages and embrace the daily challenges of life. Yet even this common vitalizing space is unable to sustain itself in the face of adversity brought about by an act of deceit and betrayal by the son-in-law of Sera who impregnates the innocent vulnerable granddaughter of Bhima. Sera is delighted that her daughter will soon be a mother but she despises Maya's ill-fated and untimely pregnancy. She is impatient to know who the father of Maya's child is but she admires Bhima's prudence and sensitivity to maintain the confidential space between them.

This is what Sera appreciates most about Bhima — this unspoken language, this intimacy that has developed between them over the years. That same connection now makes her realize that Bhima wants to wait until the children have left for work before telling her what happened yesterday. And she is glad, because, truth be told, she does not want the shadow of Maya's unfortunate circumstances to fall over the happiness of Dinaz's pregnancy.⁶

Sera, her daughter Dinaz, and their maid Bhima share a similar relationship as women, but the special friendship of Sera and Bhima, revolves not just around the physical and material space of their shared daily domestic chores but more so the emotional space of their shared pain, frustration, and emptiness. In the short breaks from their

⁶Thrity Umrigar, *The Space between Us*, New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 2005, 20.

routine work, they share an incongruent physical space as Sera is firmly seated on a chair, with Bhima crouched on the floor at her feet, sipping tea together from different cups, one of porcelain and the other of steel, which are kept in separate crockery cabinets in the house. Despite the social space and the disparity between them, they experience comfort and strength as they cautiously and surreptitiously lay bare their souls to each other.

Dinaz, observing the intimate relationship between her mother and the domestic maid, is baffled by the incongruence in their relationship,

You tell all your friends that Bhima is like a family member, that you couldn't live without her... And yet she's not good enough to sit at the table with us. And you and Daddy are always talking about those high caste Hindus burning Harijans and how wrong that is. But in your own house, you have these caste differences, too. What hypocrisy, Mummy.⁷

Sera was quick to defend herself in retaining class etiquette. She explains to her daughter that some differences have to be maintained between employer and employee. She also reminds her that her loyalty must be primarily to her own family and not to the family of the employee.⁸ Dinaz had no clue of what her mother had to endure. Bhima is the lone witness to the scars of Sera, both physical and emotional, from the merciless beatings of her husband. And although Sera tries to keep a considerable distance from Bhima because she is from the slums, she permits her to rub her bruised arm which not only provides relief from the pain but is uplifting and invigorating. Sera is fully aware that "even at the sweetest moment of lovemaking with Feroz, it never felt as generous, as selfless, as this massage did."⁹ The bonds of intimacy are indeed paradoxical and complicated. Sera believed that "lovemaking always came with strings attached — the needs of the other had to be met" and so in essence "sex was ultimately a selfish act, the expectations of one body intrinsically woven into the needs of the other."¹⁰ What discomfited Sera was her hunch that Bhima, more than knowing her vulnerability and abuse, could sense what was going on in the inner space of her thoughts and emotions. Bhima occasionally would offer counsel to her mistress: "Serabai, you are much wiser than I am, an educated woman, while I am illiterate. But, bai, listen to me — do not tolerate what he is doing

⁷Umrigar, *The Space between Us*, 27.

⁸Umrigar, *The Space between Us*, 28.

⁹Umrigar, *The Space between Us*, 108.

¹⁰Umrigar, *The Space between Us*, 108.

to you. Tell somebody.”¹¹ While Sera was too afraid to confront her husband, she was comforted to have someone who understood and shared her pain. She, however, also unknowingly exploited Bhima for her own need. While enjoying the benefits of Bhima’s care and kindness, she maintained a safe distance to preserve the socio-cultural caste/class divide.

Sera would never voluntarily enter the space that Bhima occupied in the slum but when Bhima was down with typhoid fever and couldn’t come to work for some days, Sera felt obliged to go and visit her there. Although the slums where Bhima lived was less than a mile away, she was shocked by what she experienced.

Sera felt as if she had entered another universe. It was one thing to drive past the slums that had sprung up all around the city. It was another thing to walk the narrow byways that led into the sprawling slum colony – to watch your patent leather shoes get splashed with the murky, muddy water that gathered in still pools on the ground; to gag at the ghastly smell of shit and God knows what else; to look away as grown men urinated in the open ditches that flowed past their homes. And the flies, thick as guilt. And the stray dogs with patches and sores on their backs. And the children squawking like chickens as their mothers hit them with their open hands. Sera had wanted to turn away, to flee this horrific world and escape back into the sanity of her life. But her concern for Bhima propelled her forward.¹²

Despite the wide gap between the rich and the poor, and the incongruous coexistence of the slums and high-rise apartments, Sera will never forget how warmly she was received in the slums. Bhima, weak and frail from her illness, rummaged through her belongings and “pulled out a five-rupee note” and gave it to her granddaughter Maya to go buy a Mangola which she knew “was Sera’s favorite soft drink.”¹³ The neighbours too extended their hospitality to her by bringing an old wooden chair for her to sit on. Sera felt ashamed and guilty to sit on the only chair in the room, while the others sat on the floor, and to sip the drink from the bottle while children around looked starved and weak. She was intrigued by “the generosity of the poor” that puts the “middle-class people to shame”; they treat “us like royalty” when in reality “they should hate our guts.”¹⁴ She was filled with remorse at “the thought of how she herself treated Bhima

¹¹Umrigar, *The Space between Us*, 111. The suffix ‘bai’ is often used as a mark of status and deference in India.

¹²Umrigar, *The Space between Us*, 113-114.

¹³Umrigar, *The Space between Us*, 114.

¹⁴Umrigar, *The Space between Us*, 115.

— not allowing her to sit on the furniture, and having her eat with separate utensils.”¹⁵ Yet, even the realization of her unequal treatment would not change the way things existed in the space between them. Sera could be sympathetic towards Bhima but she thought of the consequences if she were to transform their disparate situation totally. She would not be able to enjoy her privileges and there would be no one to carry out her chores faithfully. Although she was aware that their worlds were totally different, she also knew that they were alike in many ways, for both their marriages had turned sour.

Gopal, Bhima’s husband, was a good man who loved her and would never have done anything to hurt her. But the cruel turn of events in his life turned him into a different man. Gopal was working in a factory but when he had an accident he was unfairly dismissed from his job. He sought to fight back against the injustice of his dismissal, but he felt overpowered. He thought:

One way or the other they would’ve tricked us. Because they own the world, you see. They have the machines and the money and the factories and the education. We are just the tools they use to get all those things. You know how I use a hammer to pound in a nail? Well they use me like a hammer to get what they want. That’s all I am to them, a hammer. And what happens to a hammer once its teeth break off? You throw it away and get a new hammer.¹⁶

Unable to cope with his anger, pain and humiliation, Gopal turned to alcohol and then began to physically abuse Bhima. It was not his beatings that left her devastated, but his walking out of her life with their only son, Amit, leaving her to fend for Pooja, their daughter, whom she also lost because of the dreaded AIDS virus that she contracted. Bhima believed that “a mother without children is not a mother at all”; yet she just had to go on, in spite of knowing that she had almost become “a machine, existing only to work and earn a salary, needing only enough food and water to keep her parts oiled and functioning.”¹⁷ Her once soft hands were “ruined from a lifetime of handling the sharp, pointed bristles of the broom, of dipping her hands in ash to scour pots and pans until they sparkled.”¹⁸ More than the stress and drudgery of her work, she suffered from losing her husband and her two children. Yet this was not the worst of her trials and problems.

¹⁵Umrigar, *The Space between Us*, 115.

¹⁶Umrigar, *The Space between Us*, 226.

¹⁷Umrigar, *The Space between Us*, 130.

¹⁸Umrigar, *The Space between Us*, 133.

Bhima's main concern now was Maya, her granddaughter who fate had cruelly thrust upon her. Bhima had simultaneous feelings of love and hate for Maya. She was an orphan needing support and compassion, but her pregnancy out of wedlock fuelled Bhima's anger. Not knowing who the father of Maya's child was, Bhima was infuriated over the shame and dishonour Maya brought upon herself. Bhima had sought help from her employers to get her educated but she regretted that Maya had made a mess of her life. Maya, however, to protect her grandmother and her job, silently endured the shame unjustly inflicted on her and did not divulge the secret of the real father. To save and keep the child of her womb, she retorts: "What does it matter who the father is, Ma-ma? The fact is that the baby is growing in my stomach, not his. That makes it my curse and *my* blessing, no one else's."¹⁹ After being persistently probed by Bhima, to pacify her, she threw the blame on an innocent college classmate of hers who knew nothing of Maya's situation.

The real culprit, Viraf, who was Sera's own son-in-law had no qualms in doing away with his illegitimate child to hide his guilt and disgrace — "Maya needs to have an abortion, and the sooner it is done, the better off she will be. I'm just surprised that we've waited all this time, actually."²⁰ Sera believed that her son-in-law meant well since he appeared to have Maya's interest at heart, but she was surprised by the casual way he thought of abortion. She was, however, oblivious of the real reason behind Viraf's remark regarding the urgency of Viraf's abortion. While Sera adored her daughter and son-in-law and envied them for the relationship she could not enjoy with her husband, she was blissfully unaware of the deceit and dishonour that her son-in-law brought upon the family. Viraf who supported Maya's education exploited her vulnerability, and had an illegitimate child with her, only to desire it aborted. There were times when Dinaz and Viraf got into occasional fights and Sera found it easy to forgive Viraf and overlook his idiosyncrasies since she thought that her daughter like any woman should be the one to compromise and remain silent as she had done in the past with Feroz.

Viraf knew how to get Bhima out of his way. He set a trap to get rid of her, by blaming her for stealing money from his grandmother's house where she was sent to do some chores. Bhima "laughs at her foolish innocence" believing as she did that she could confront a

¹⁹Umrigar, *The Space between Us*, 41.

²⁰Umrigar, *The Space between Us*, 69.

powerful man like Viraf and not have to pay the price.²¹ She tried to defend herself but her voice was unheeded and she was left jobless, broken and shattered. Under the circumstances, no matter how faithful she had been to Sera, in the end she was convinced that class privilege and power could easily conceal class dishonour. One pays a high price to speak truth to power. She hoped that Sera, the one to whom she had devoted her life, would come to her rescue. Alas, “denial falls on her face like a white veil” and she feels Sera “receding from her, like a moon that climbs higher and higher into the night sky.”²² As she painfully walked out of Sera’s house, she was lost in thought:

Hell is on the other side of this door. Hell is trying to get another job at my age, to learn the ways of another family, to sweep and clean and cook for strangers. Hell is working for less money for a strange family and watch Maya throw her future away like rotten fruit. Hell is knowing there will never be another Serabai, no one will take an interest in Maya’s education, no one who will care if she, Bhima lives or dies.²³

The affective ties between Bhima and Sera are severed by social and cultural norms, sheer privilege and circumstance. Indeed, the bonds of friendship, trust and loyalty in the spaces between persons are rendered fragile by gender, race, caste, class and social prejudices.

3. Reclaiming the Power of the Space Within

The thin woman in the green sari stood on the slippery rocksand gazed at the dark waters around her...

Her hands were empty now, as empty as her heart, which itself was a coconut shell with its meat scooped out...

Behind her was the lost city and a life that at this very moment felt fictitious and unreal.

Ahead of her was the barely visible seam where the sea met the sky.

She could scramble over these rocks, climb over the cement wall, and reenter the world; partake again of the mad, throbbing, erratic pulse of the city.

Or she could walk into the waiting sea, let it seduce her, overwhelm her with its intimate whisperings.²⁴

Should she succumb to the irresistible water of the sea or should she turn back and resist the powerful forces that surround her? In

²¹Umrigar, *The Space between Us*, 300.

²²Umrigar, *The Space between Us*, 302-303.

²³Umrigar, *The Space between Us*, 304.

²⁴Umrigar, *The Space between Us*, 304, sec. Prologue.

desolation and despair, one is often led to hasty decisions. Yet she experienced a sudden inner strength and resilience. In her brokenness and anguish, she visualized the *balloonwalla*, whom she had encountered in the past in this very place. He was a solitary itinerant man with no family or home, but he won the hearts of young and old, selling balloons on the seashore, and bringing laughter and life to all with his tales. Sitting now in front of the deep blue sea, contemplating the past, engulfed by a deadening silence, Bhima is awakened by the echo of the nameless balloon seller's deep comforting voice. His melodious words spoke of "the bitterness of exile and the sweetness of solitariness, of the fear of being alone in the world and the freedom that flaps its wings just below that fear."²⁵ She realized that when the fear of tragedy and solitude ceases what emerges is a powerful freedom from within — a freedom that is ready to dare and risk beginning again.

It was this inner freedom that gave Bhima hope, resilience and resolution in the face of rejection, injustice, and deceit. Unmindful of the sounds and the chatter around, she was "taking her orders from a different authority now, following the fluttering sound in her ears, the sound of flapping wings, the sound of learning how to fly."²⁶ The present and the future for Bhima "hang in the air for a moment, both a promise and a threat"... It is dark, but inside Bhima's heart it is dawn."²⁷ Freedom is truly a choice. Women can be beaten and abused, singled out and humiliated; but no one can strip them totally of their dignity. Even though the odds are against them, the choice is theirs — to be resigned to their fate and doom or to pick up the pieces and move on. This is what impels strong women to move on... and on. If they stop, they are damned to despair. If they move on there is hope of a better tomorrow.

4. Prophetically Negotiating the Conflicting Spaces

The narrative of Bhima and Sera is a striking revelation of the fact that even when there are opportunities to share a common space, the oppressive elements of patriarchy, sexism, classism, and casteism reinforce and retain the spaces between persons. While the economic growth and development of India is projected as spectacular, there still exists pervasive poverty, gender disparity, religious fundamentalism, and a dehumanizing caste system. The inequalities

²⁵Umrigar, *The Space between Us*, 314-315.

²⁶Umrigar, *The Space between Us*, 315.

²⁷Umrigar, *The Space between Us*, 321.

are more persistent as one goes down the social rungs with women usually at the lowest level. The spaces that divide and separate cannot simply be eradicated or overthrown; they have to be constantly negotiated and reconciled. The fundamental dignity and rights of all persons need to be recognized and upheld. What matters most is not the sacralizing of spaces; but the ability to see persons and spaces as sacred, imbued with the presence and goodness of God.

Considering the case of Bhima and Sera, it is evident that, on one hand, they shared an intimate space of friendship, support and care. On the other hand, both were confined by socio-cultural restrictions and prejudices. While it was Sera who was primarily responsible for Bhima, it was Sera's son-in-law, Viraf, who assumed full power to displace Bhima of her job. To obscure his betrayal and shame, Viraf totally estranged Bhima from her connection with Sera, robbing her of her work and livelihood. Bhima did not really belong to the lowest strata of society by the very fact that she did the cooking and even food shopping compared to other domestic workers who have to clean the toilets and mop the floor. Yet, Bhima's doom is the plight of many domestic workers, working long hours doing strenuous and backbreaking jobs. Deprived of their basic rights and opportunities and curtailed of their freedom to speak and defend themselves, they are at the mercy of their employers.

Though treated unjustly, Bhima did not yield like her husband Gopal, to her circumstances. Heeding the prophetic words of a nameless balloon seller, she maintained her self-respect and continued her life with hope, freedom and dignity. In her brokenness and pain, the comforting voice of the balloon seller ringing from a distance restored her sense of self-worth, giving her the much needed courage to move ahead with renewed determination.

Irrespective of gender, status, religion and culture, each one is called to be a prophet, seeker, evangelizer, missionary, and liberator for our time, in our space and according to our culture. The nameless balloon seller in the narrative was not aware that he was a harbinger of hope to Bhima. He enabled her to envision a new space of freedom, and cross her shackled existence, to forge ahead with hope and courage. She crossed the boundaries to reclaim the space within, between, and beyond, toward the space that embraces all. Her resilience and resistance is an inspiration and challenge to awaken in

all women a yearning to reclaim the space within them and move forward with hope and courage.

*Noble woman you were called from eternity
to be a bearer of all humanity!
Fearfully you hearken to the false principles of fate
And passively consider yourself simply a helpmate.
You have so much to offer in wisdom, nurturance and strength.
But you often choose to remain hidden deep down with your head bent.
It's time to wake up once again and let the fire of your inner passion
Enkindle within you the flame of love and indignation
To lift up and care but also to break down and tear
Any oppressive structure of misrepresentation.
Let us arise then as resolute women and embrace our prophetic call
to reclaim the power within and to go and empower others!*