

Exploration of Alienated Self in Thrity Umrigar's If Today Be Sweet

¹S. Mary Sophia Rani, ²Dr. G. Gulam Tariq,

Ph.D Research Scholar, Department of English, Yogi Vemana University, Kadapa, Andhra Pradesh, India.

Professor of English, Department of English, Yogi Vemana University Kadapa, Andhra Pradesh, India.

Submitted: 01-05-2021

Revised: 10-05-2021

Accepted: 12-05-2021

ABSTRACT: Family comprises of many relations like husband-wife, father-daughter, mother-son and brother- sister. In all these relationships the relation between husband and wife has always occupied a central place. Love, faith and understandings are the fundamental poles in the relationships. But the role of woman is always determined by the male society and treats secondary. Woman needs identity. Present day woman fight for her identity, freedom, discrimination and equality.

Women writers choose to focus their writings on the experiences of woman in the society. Mainly South Asian women writers write from almost anywhere in the world, from all parts of Asia, from USA, Canada, Australia, etc. Many of the diasporic writers focused on the immigrant life of woman in their new county. The themes of their fiction based on race, culture, home, family back ground, identity, loneliness, nationality and political status.

Thrity Umrigar is one such writer, who through her writings shows how India and Indianess figures in the diasporic writings from USA. She belongs to twentieth century Indian born American novelist, who contributed substantially to the diasporic women writings. Her works deal with major contemporary social issues like alienation, nostalgia, exploitation, racism, cultural clashes, discrimination, class deviation and poverty.

The present paper glances at one of her novels *If Today be Sweet*(2007) and explores the way of the female characters are represented. The prominence of the paper on the "Exploration of Alienated Self", the protagonist experiences from different world and struggles to cling in that culture in the alien land. Tehmina, the protagonist of the novel suffers from the pain of being far away from the home and the memories of her mother land.

Key words: Diaspora, immigrant, alienated self and culture.

INTRODUCTION

Thrity Umrigar is an Indian born American novelist, journalist and critic. She was

born in Bombay, India, and moved to the USA at the age of twenty-one. After received her M.A. degree, she worked as a daily reporter for seventeen years. Present she is working at Case Western University. Her fiction powerfully explored the human relationships, family, power twists, poverty, identity, class difference, and life of immigrants in America. Most of her novels have diasporic elements. She has eight novels to her credit. Her debut novel is *Bombay Time* published in 2001, *The Space between Us* (2006), *If Today be Sweet* (2007), *The Weight of Heaven* (2009), *The World we Found* (2012), *The Story Hour* (2014), *Everybody's Son* (2017) *The Secrets Between Us* (2018) and a memoir *First Darling of the Morning* (2004).

Umrigar belongs to Parsi community, proud to be a Parsi, she portrays her community, customs and Zoroastrian life in the most of her novels. Inher novels *Bombay Time*, *The Space between Us* and *If Today be Sweet*, she depicts her love for Bombay and most of the characters are Parsis. Her fondness for Bombay and Parsi community is similar to that of Rohinton Mistry. In most of their novels they celebrated Bombay, the city of their birth.

In the past few years many prominent Indian women writers have made a mark not only in the field of Indian English Literature but also in the diasporic literature. The writers of diasporic literature focused on the lives of immigrants, problems faced in the alien land, rootlessness, homelessness, identity, isolation and cultural clash. Most of the writers expressed their personal experiences faced in the 'new country' through the characters of their works. Like Bharati Mukherjee, Chitra Banerji Divakaruni, Umrigar belongs to the genre of Indo-American Literature. Her fictional writings portray multi facets of Indian women, their plight, sufferings, and domestic space in the site of contact and conflicts between tradition and modernity.

The present paper delineates how a widowed woman as an individual undergoes her psychological, and personal trauma which allows them to strengthen her emotional chords there by to stand up to the situation and audaciously accept the challenges of her life in the novel *If Today be Sweet*. It deals with these situations and analyzes them that protagonist experienced, and will bring to light the struggles, challenges, acceptance and resistance to the American life.

If Today be Sweet is a story about an Indian woman, who after her husband's death she moved to America where her only son settled with his family. The protagonist Tehmina is, in a dilemma whether to stay in America or in India. She experienced different situations and suffered lonely in the adopted land. It is hard to settle down in America and give up her own country. If she stays in America she has to change according to circumstances. The rough pictures that Umrigar draws of the sensitive moments which reflect the psychological pain that comes with the changes of culture and life that protagonist experienced. In her words;

“To give up the city of one's birth, old friends whom you grew up with, an apartment that you've decorated and cleaned and furnished, all this is very hard....”(156)

Tehmina Vakail, the woman protagonist of the novel, was born in Calcutta and the only child of a doctor Hoshang Vakail. Through a program at the school, she met Nilu, one of her friends from Bombay. To attend Nilu's birthday party, she begged her father to go Bombay. She is embarrassed with the feeling of unexpected pleasure of freedom, for the first being away from home and the thoughts of *Bandra*, where the movie stars, and *Juhu Beach*. She thinks;

“I'm in Bombay, she kept saying herself. These are all Bombayites. Everything she'd ever heard about Bombayites seemed true- these people were more mature, more sophisticated, more urbane than her crowd in Calcutta.” (111)

She met Rustom Sethna in Bombay, one of common friends of Nilu, fell in love each other, and convinced their families to get marry. Eventually she moved to Bombay, the place she loves more than Calcutta. Their only son Sorab, a good, brave and courageous man, went to America for higher education. He is married to Susan, an American and settled there with her and their only son Cookie. Tehmina and Rustom visits America once a year in the Christmas vacation. The sudden death of Rustom is a terrible blow in her life and it changes her life a lot, her hope, and her identity. After the incident she has to move America

unwillingly. Umrigar explores the life of an older Parsi woman, who comes to America from India and the analysis of widowed Tehmina how she tries to fit into the new world, and tries to decide what parts of her life she can retain.

This is a tender story of family, pain, love, loss, and widowhood of Tehmina, a sixty-six-years old Bombayite, with her loss and having to carve out a new life for herself in a new country. The dilemma that she faces whether to live in India with the memories of her husband or in the USA, where their only son settled. But she is unsure of what to do with rest of her life in America, and if she decides to live in Bombay, where everything is familiar and reminds her the memories of her husband, where they are around every corner of their apartment and the city, which she loved more than her birth place.

“In Bombay, I feel like a person- a person whose life has meaning, whose life follows a path.” (Umrigar 32)

In this miserable condition as a widow and an immigrant she feels insecure, emotionally weak, stressed, and depressed. The difficult days she had followed her husband's funeral and reeling with grief and streaks of loneliness, has her reasonable anxieties within a world that has many turns, diversions challenges wager- like situations. She has to adjust herself and due to continuous emotional stress she loses her mental balance. Going back to India and continuing her life there, would feel at home with herself. But if she settled in America, it would give her a chance of living with her son and his family. Thuen asserts;

Widows reported lower levels of psychological wellbeing than married. After the death of spouse, her life becomes mismanaged and therefore, she has more difficulty to cope with her problems in such situation. In the social sphere, the condition of widow is much worse in India than what we see in many other countries. (Thuen 1997)

In this period of mourning over the loss of a husband, the old memories are reawakening and that leads to a re-evaluation of one's life. Moreover, the sphere of life may be shrinking and need to establish new relationships to overcome their loneliness and have to adjust to the unfamiliar surroundings. The changing circumstances make a person's life and choices ultimately shaped. Here, the protagonist is faces two types of problems, one is the loss of husband and another one is alienated from motherland. The process of decision making becomes a Himalayan task to her. The great distress she found herself a stranger in the new environment. She is totally confused to being an Indian or American. She bestrides between two

cultures India and America, straddling between two worlds, familiar and alien, two ideologies, and two ways of life.

This dislocation costs her cultural isolation and social estrangement. This sense of alienation perceived a state of rootlessness and loneliness. These two variants of alienations are related because they come from the same basic condition of anomie. This situation doesn't arise merely in Tehmina's life, it takes place when a person stays in the alien land, as he feels that he is a stranger and has to struggle a lot to overcome his nostalgic feelings. Sometimes the migrants lose the complete sense of belongingness and encounters cultural differences and identity crisis. She thinks;

"And yet.... Bombay is my home. Here, I am afraid that I will always be a stranger that I will never get used to all these days..."(Umrigar 32)

The institution of marriage provides not only the companion in the life but it also provides psychological and emotional support. Rustom is a man of boundless confidence and make people happy around him. Due to his death Tehmina lose the source of getting emotional support. In this situation she becomes more isolated, feels alienated and insecure. Her life is easy, painless and unworried when she had her husband but in his absence she feels that her life is aimless, concave and sunken. Now she reminds Rustom; "My darling. Look how I am floundering without you. Look how I can't make the smallest decision without you." (Umrigar 91)

After Rustom's demise, she moved to America along with her son Sorab. Though it is not her first visit to the USA, but it is her first visit without her husband. Once, everything is familiar-Sorab, Susan and Cookie and the house, but now it is unfamiliar. She clearly felt the absence of her husband. Sometimes they conveyed their displeasure over her grief. She felt a pang of remorse about their irritation when she mentioned his name, it would be like breaking the social rule. She wondered that he has been banned from their live.

"Does everything in this country have an expiration date? She wondered even grief and mourning (Umrigar 130)

She gets solace only in the presence of her grandson Cookie, but she often feels as an intruder in her daughter-in-law's home and perturbed by the changes in her son Sorab, who is stressed from the corporate rat race. Sometimes he yells at her using foul language and his voice bitter and scary in its frustration. Her loneliness floods with the memories of her husband, community, her traditional ways – she found no small amount of

purpose in America. In widows the fear and anxiety was produced by being alone, isolation would be an unbearable experience to them and sometimes loneliness may lead to depression and loss of hope. Besides the loss of Rustom's company, memories of her motherland and the loneliness in alien land humiliated her. They provide her everything food, shelter and clothing to fulfil their duty. But she wants their love, care and attention. Because she is in emotional need of love, care and respect of family members rather than just getting enough food, clothes and a place to live in. As a widow she feels that she loses her status in the family. Malkinson, Ruth, a reviewer of APA PsycNET asserts;

"Widows found a greater lack of emotional than instrumental support; people attitudes and comments rather than their actions were perceived as unhelpful and painful". (Malkinson, Ruth 1987)

Her life in India is entirely different from America, as a mother, wife, and daughter-in-law she fulfilled all her duties. She caressed her ill mother-in-law and helped elderly people of her neighborhood. She visits orphanages to serve poor children, and open handedly welcomes Percy when his mother died of cancer, whose father was alcoholic and could not adequately take care of him. Her life is busy with a blur of ringing doorbells and raised voices of fisher woman, newspaper boy, baker, and butcher all made her morning busy. The chain of unexpected visitors and relatives who dropped in without calling all made her breathless. But her life is completely contrasted, she is alone, unable to adjust in this new host country, gradually she becomes the victim of isolation, alienation, confusion and identity crisis.

She always wonders that how simple the way of Americans' life leading. Though they are individualistic and dynamic but they think that life is too much laughter and play, as the life in a Walt Disney movie, forward looking, optimistic and self-improvement but they are spending more money on therapists and grief counselors. She doesn't know why they have to pay the therapists to listen to them, because of the nuclear families, no grandparents and aunt or uncle in the family, her thoughts about Indian and American life;

"Life is a Bollywood melodrama-full of loss and sadness. And so everyone rejects Bollywood for Disney. Even my Sorab was seduced by Disney life- all this pursuit of happiness and pursuit of money, but this year I've learned a new lesson. May be the Indian way is better after all." (32)

When Sorab decides to go to America for higher education, Tehmina had thought that going to America could broaden his horizons, would make him stand on the shoulders of his parents and see farther than they ever had. But instead the inconsistent had happened. In a strange way, he seemed to have shrunk and his world had narrowed. She remembering the college days of her son, the boy who had go upon the crowded, thunderous streets of Bombay, who had catch a train to college in the noisy crowds, who had eaten and drunk from roadside booth, and who had witnessed the whole human experience, the millionaires, the lepers and slum colonies. But he disappeared from the world what he had experienced in Bombay. Such a boy, now he could fence himself in a timid, clean, antiseptic world where there was free from germs, bacteria as well as passion and human misery. He is in a shell like a snail. She humiliates and thinks about Sorab; “how did he expect his sixty-six-year old mother to live in that world”. (8). Susan, as an American woman, always struggles for a neat house and a clean bathroom, she fights with Sorab about his mother doesn't clean the house and bathroom. If Tehmina decided to settle with them, they going to ask servant to come and clean every week instead of two weeks, and also want to move in to a bigger house. She felt a chill in her heart that she heard the words from Percy about the need of bigger house, it meant that her presence was an inconvenience to them. She thought about her thoughtless habits (gargled loud in bathroom which Susan hates so much) and behaviors which affected Susan and Sorab and created abrasion between them. Although she tries to live subduedly in their house, and uses bathroom stealthily at night so not to wake them up. She feels a guest in the house, and how eager she wants to help Susan in any way she could, also disappear when necessary. Her heart sting with coldness at the image of her son's appeasing his frustrated wife Susanwife. Sometimes he also expresses his dissatisfaction;

“Maybe asking Mamma to live with us is not a good idea, maybe she need to go back home at the end of her six months”. (63)

Tehmina loves to visit the Farmers' Market in the USA along with Eva, it gives pleasure and comfort to her. It is quite different from the antiseptic, air-conditioned, and clean supermarkets in America. The dirty floors, noisy, crowded streets, sweaty vendors and the rotting fruits, all remind her, the markets of Bombay. She feels;

“To bite an American apple or an orange was to taste disappointment. Nothing burst with flavor, nothing tasted as sweet or as tangy the way fruits did in Bombay. Even the roses of America had no perfume to them, a fact that Tehmina still couldn't quite accept.” (34)

But being an American, Susan doesn't like Tehmina's visit to the Farmer's Market, often she expresses her disapproval; ‘god knows why she came home loaded with fruits and vegetables’ (59). Sometimes Sorab also irritates about this, ‘Mamma could be passive-aggressive. All bloody Parsi women were’. (59) She thought that if she settled in America that would burdens Sorab and Susan's lives, who are busy withtheir professions and it is difficult to spend time to take care of her because of their busy schedule. She is alone all the day at home, no neighbors and no sidewalks. The only solace she got in the alien land is Eva Metzembaum, an American woman who comes to love and consider as her best friend. She feels comfortable and shares everything with her. Abandonment and neglect is one of the greatest miseries in age of Tehmina. Talott, Maria assert in their journal;

“The relationship of widows and their adult children and found that some widows seemed to feel that they annoy or irritate their children and that they are unwelcome in their children lives. Some widows felt emotionally dependent on their children.” (Maria 1990)

The attitude towards death in America is entirely different, what Tehmina experienced her visit after departure of Rustom. Death did not constitute an important challenge to the individual Americans. Being an American Susan said to Tehmina about Rustom's death ‘the sad stuff-if it just brings you down’ (7). But according to Indian tradition death treats as sacred thing and the period of mourning immediately following the cremation which lasts thirteen days, it is vary according to the place, people, caste and circumstances. But the Americans talk to a therapist to overcome their grief. Even Sorab also suggest her to take pills in her mourning period. The cultural and traumatic shock she experiences in the alien land. She needs emotional support in this period otherwise she becomes more isolated. The people in this age and condition need a good company to console in the difficulties, worries and provide support in despair. They may face various psychological problems that affect their personality, behaviour and health. She wants to say to her daughter-in-law;

“You will know what it's like to miss someone so badly it's like your own organs betray

you. Your heart, your skin, your brain, all turn into traitors.” (8)

Umrigar’s skilled and natural ways of storytelling captures the image of India through the stern plot twists the tragedies of her protagonist Tehmina fantastically wealthy. Her writings offer excellent insights into this important aspect of our changing times and mobile society which expresses itself in the alienation of her characters. She also attempts a graphic portrayal of cultural alienation owing to marital discords.

Umrigar provides her woman character the courage and strength to overcome her miseries and shows her the ways to fight in the difficult situations. A kind of woman Tehmina influences many people in America, makes new relationships and so it forms as a new family. During the course of six months stay in America, she begins to see the world in a new light. She emotionally bonds with the two neglected American boys from the next door, which caused to change her life. Tara is an arrogant mother of the two boys Jerome and Joshua, a sharp bird like faces who looks dirty than the poor boys in India, is the neighbor of Sorab. Tehmina often feeds them when they are hungry. But Susan strictly instructs her that she don’t want the two boys to around her son Cookie. Susan instructs;

“I don’t want any puking in my kitchen. You have a good heart mom, I really appreciate that but I want you to listen to me-I don’t want to have those boys over again I hope you can respect my decision.” (16,20)

But feeding the people gives Tehmina pleasure and satisfaction. She always remembers the words that Rustom used to say that two things are important to human being ‘food and education, so never refuse to give them to people’. Her heart breaks at each time the boys opened their mouth with hungry. She wants to slit open her belly and hid the boys there and keeps them safe and warm forever. The mother of the two boys is so difficult, imperious and plays rap music at late night. She yells her children terrifically and calls them ‘trouble’. (5) Tehmina always wondered at her treating of children, how could any mother in the world called her children ‘trouble’ and how could god gives her such precious gifts to. Her eyes sting with tears the way of Tara treating her two boys. She beats them and one of the boys is bleeding. She left the injured boy alone at home and drove away. Tehmina looked around and prayed for help, any neighbor would come and stop her madness, like the neighbors in Bombay who ran from all directions.

“No neighborhood woman come and held the sobbing boys to her breast; no neighborhood child looked at Tara with big, accusing, shaming eyes.” (Umrigar 193)

Her heart melts with the image of the wounded boys. She decided to rescue the boys but one side the words of Susan whirling in her mind about not to contact with the next door family and another side the thought of the boys alone at home, finally she decided to save the boys, she was shivering with the cold and afraid when she eyed the six feet fence. The words of Susan that not to contact them and she thinks of neighbors, if someone caught her crazy mission streaks in her mind, but she jumped off the fence. She forced herself to enter in to the house of Tara where the two boys sit in the corner of the room as quite as mice. She brings the boys to her home.

She wants to break the news to her son, but meantime her grandson Cookie called 911. Two officers came and after investigation, appreciate her crazy mission and takes the boys to their aunt’s house. Everything is so different from her ways of life in India. Sorab’s eyes narrows when he sees his mother’s picture in the daily mirror and the news of jumping over the fence in head line “A Christmas Miracle”. He thinks about his mother;

“Mamma, who refused to even go to the gym in the housing complex, mamma, who had to rest if they walked too fast in the park, yeah, he could just see his mother jumping over the fence. She might as well jump over the moon.” (225)

When Sorab asks her about this incident she is afraid, like a heavy, clumsy bird with broken wings. But things have been changed for a short while. The Americans start praising her crazy mission, which is so alien to them and applauds her as an ‘American hero’. The Mayor of the town, Sorab’s boss and others start acclaim her bravery and courage. But once, America is the place, which is alien world to her, who felt lonely here. Now, America is the familiar world, and has a family here. She is a good natured woman that everyone could see a mother, grandmother, friend, and want to be around. She just demonstrates her goodness, virtue and integrity. She is a stranger to America but it praises her as;

“She is a visitor to America; she is stranger to this country. But to two frightened young Rosemont Heights boys, Bombay native Tehmina Sethna, 66, turned out to be ‘A Christmas Angel’.” (228)

Umrigar succeeds in its wonderful analysis of the woman’s experience in a foreign land, who caught between two cultures, one is

familiar and another is strange. Making decision-some decisions are small, some are large and some are life changing. Here in America she has her family, who needs her presence and love, Cookie needs her, as a grandmother who could give her love to him, Susan needs her to burnish her rough edges, remind her responsibilities, Sorab, Percy, Joe(Sorab's boss, who treats her as his mother), Eva need her, she has enough love for all of them. A sweet natured woman, Tehmina sprinkles everyone's life with a bit of sugar, so that everyone will live happily ever after.

Finally, she decides to stay in America on her own terms. The country teaches her how to live independently, dignifiedly and individually. She wants to live her rest of life alone in her own apartment. So there is no need to sell Sorab's house to buy a bigger one. Now she is brave, dare and courageous to lead her life alone. Rustom says;

"A woman who so adored me, who so relied on my strength and that she forgot to measure her own worth, who never new she carried the world, my world, in the palm of her hand." (3)

Umrigar handles the emotions of the central characters, the tragic beauty implied by her narrative art, and the feminine psyche of the novelist enlightened by experience of contemporary India. At the end of the novel, it is Tehmina, who stands apart for her extraordinary strength and flexibility, to with stand the terrible odds and pressures. Umrigar disposes keen insight in to the human psyche, and the striking talent that portraying the situations. Her art of narration is immense, in the novel the 'fence' resembles as decision making. Here the fence is a separator. To choose one between two things, two cultures, and two nations.

"When she had found the courage to jump, she had landed in more than Antonio's yard. She had landed in America. The fence had been the dividing line between the past and the future, between India and America." (293)

Umrigar draws the universal elements; love, loss, grief, acceptance belonging, family, isolation, uncertainty and community and brought them to the place where cultures conserve their identity and are traverse by their commonalities. She depicts the difficulties in compassionately revealing the wonderful humanity through the character of her protagonist. Tehmina's seeming alienation is strikingly described by the novelist. She is perhaps the most afflicted victim of the cultural alienation resulting from the East-West encounter depicted by Umrigar. The way she weaves the complexities of women especially as immigrants are vulnerable. Her narrative style is

humane, sympathetic, compelling and evoking the pain and sufferings women faced in the society.

REFERENCES:

- [1]. Umrigar, Thrity. *If Today be Sweet*, Harper Collins, Pub- 2008- ISBN – 978-0-06-124023-2.
- [2]. Thuen, Frode, Reime, Marit, Hegg: Skrautoll, Kari (1997), *The Effect of Widowhood on Psychological well-being and Social support in the Oldest Group of Elderly*. *Journal of Mental Health*, UK, 6, 265-274.
- [3]. Malkinson, Ruth. (1987), *Helping and being helped: The Support Paradox*. *Death Studies*, 11, 205-219.
- [4]. Talott, Maria M. (1990), *The Negative side of the Relationship between Older Widows and their Adult Children: The Mothers Perspective*. *Gerontologist*, 30, 595-603.