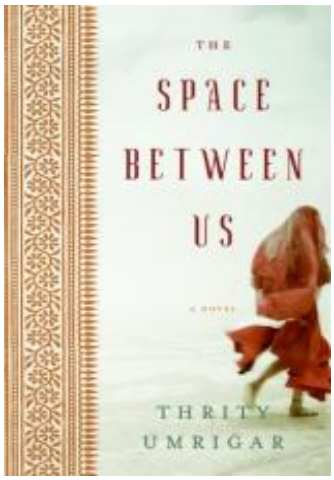
# The Space Between Us

by Thrity Umrigar




## About the Book

Each morning, Bhima, a domestic servant in contemporary Bombay, leaves her own small shanty in the slums to tend to another woman's house. In Sera Dubash's home, Bhima scrubs the floors of a house in which she remains an outsider. She cleans furniture she is not permitted to sit on. She washes glasses from which she is not allowed to drink. Yet despite being separated from each other by blood and class, she and Sera find themselves bound by gender and shared life experiences.

Sera is an upper-middle-class Parsi housewife whose opulent surroundings hide the shame and disappointment of her abusive marriage. A widow, she devotes herself to her family, spending much of her time caring for her pregnant daughter, Dinaz, a kindhearted, educated professional, and her charming and successful son-in-law, Viraf.

Bhima, a stoic illiterate hardened by a life of despair and loss, has worked in the Dubash household for more than twenty years. Cursed by fate, she sacrifices all for her beautiful, headstrong granddaughter, Maya, a university student whose education -- paid for by Sera -- will enable them to escape the slums. But when an unwed Maya becomes pregnant by a man whose identity she refuses to reveal, Bhima's dreams of a better life for her granddaughter, as well as for herself, may be shattered forever.

Poignant and compelling, evocative and unforgettable, **The Space Between Us** is an intimate portrait of a distant yet familiar world. Set in modern-day India and witnessed through two compelling and achingly real women, the novel shows how the lives of the rich and the poor are intrinsically connected yet vastly removed from each other, and vividly captures how the bonds of womanhood are pitted against the divisions of class and culture.

## Discussion Guide

**1.** At the end of **The Space Between Us**, Sera has a tough choice to make. Can you envision a scenario where she

could've made a different choice? What would it have taken for her to have made a different choice? And what would be the consequences of that choice?

**2.** The novel deals with a relationship that, despite all the good will in the world, is ultimately based on the exploitation of one human being by another. Has this novel caused you to look at any situations in your own life where you may be benefiting from the labor or poverty of another?

**3.** Remarking on the fact that Bhima is not allowed to sit on the furniture in Sera Dubash's home, or drink from the same glass, it could be said that the novel is about a kind of "Indian Apartheid." Do you think that's putting it too strongly? If not, can you identify any parallels in contemporary America?

**4.** The novel tracks the lives of two women. Trace some of the ways in which their lives resemble each other's. What are the points of departure?

**5.** Neither Sera nor Bhima end up with happy, successful marriages. Why? Trace the factors that cause each marriage to fail. And for all its failings, which woman has the better marriage?

**6.** Sera's mother-in-law, Banu, makes life miserable for the young Sera. Is Banu the kind of mother-in-law that many American women can identify with? Examine the ways in which she is or isn't the typical in-law.

**7.** The Afghani balloonwalla is a minor but pivotal character in the novel. What is his role? What does he symbolize or represent?

**8.** The novel is told from the points of view of the two women, Bhima and Sera. Should it have included more points of view? For instance, should Viraf have had his own "voice"?

**9.** How do you read the ending of the book? Is it a hopeful ending? Do you think the ending is justified, given what awaits Bhima the next day?

**10.** What is your opinion about Sera, especially given the choice she makes in the end. Is she a sympathetic character? Or is she part of the problem?

**11.** This is a novel about the intersection of class and gender. Can you think of ways in which gender bonds the two women and ways in which class divides them?

**12.** Is Gopal justified in being furious at Bhima for having signed the contract that the accountant puts before her during the cab ride to the hospital? Would the family's fate have been different if she hadn't signed that paper?

**13.** Two characters who help Bhima -- Hyder, the boy in the hospital and the Afghani balloon seller, both happen to be Muslims. Why? What does the novel say about the issues of religious and communal divisions in India?

**14.** What does this novel say about the importance of education? Think of some examples where the lack of education hurts a character and conversely, instances of where having an education benefits someone.

**15.** In some ways, the city of Bombay is a character in the novel. What are your impressions of Bombay after having

read this novel? Does the author portray the city with affection or disdain?

**16.** What societal changes and/or personal choices would need to be different in order for us to envision the possibility of someone like Bhima having a better life?

**17.** The author has said that although the plot of **The Space Between Us** is a work of fiction, the character of Bhima is based on a woman who used to work in her home when the writer was a teenager. Is there any person in your own life who has inspired you enough to want to write a book about them? What is it about that person that had a deep impact on you?

## Author Bio

Thrity Umrigar is the bestselling author of such novels as HONOR, which was a Reese's Book Club pick, as well as three picture books and a memoir. Her books have been published in over 20 countries and in several languages. A former journalist, she has contributed to the *Washington Post*, the *Boston Globe*, the *New York Times*, the *Cleveland Plain Dealer* and other newspapers. She is a recipient of the Nieman Fellowship to Harvard, and winner of the Cleveland Arts Prize, the Seth Rosenberg prize and a Lambda Literary award. She is currently a Distinguished University Professor of English at Case Western Reserve University.

## Critical Praise

"Poignant."

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**Publication Date:** January 1, 2006
**Genres:** Fiction
**Hardcover:** 336 pages
**Publisher:** William Morrow
**ISBN-10:** 0060791551
**ISBN-13:** 9780060791551