

## Sisterhood: A Feminist Motto of Empowerment in Thrity Umrigar's *The Secrets Between Us*

**Tuhin Shuvra Sen**

Associate Professor  
Department of English  
University of Chittagong  
Chattogram-4331, Bangladesh  
tuhinshuvrasen@gmail.com

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### **Abstract**

Sisterhood as a fountainhead of women empowerment is a widespread motif in popular feminist discourse around the globe. Though feminist critics differ in their opinions about the nature and constitution of this solidarity among women, none denies the significance of forming alliance and developing camaraderie among women on the ground that such sorority assists them in their struggle against oppression to ensure immediate survival and achieve sustainable growth. Indian born American novelist Thrity Umrigar's *The Secrets Between Us* (2018) recounts the triumph of sisterhood between two elderly women, Bhima and Parvati, by manifesting their synergic fortitude in both confronting and surmounting innumerable odds like poverty, deprivation, illiteracy, sexist oppression, deception, sexual assault, class and caste division, and infirmities of old age. This paper aims at unfolding the nature of the sororal tie between these two ageing women as well as analysing how this bond of sisterhood functions as an endowing factor in turning their heart-rending past and precarious present into a propitious future.

Keywords: Sisterhood; Solidarity; Sharing; Oppression; Struggle; Empowerment

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The notion of a universal sisterhood is one of the central tenets of Radical feminism in the 1970s. This idea of a sisterly tie formed among women irrespective of race, class, creed, colour or ethnicity urges women across the globe to unite for mutual support in fighting against patriarchal oppression. According to the Radical feminists, complete elimination of patriarchy along with the obliteration of male domination is the only means of liberating women in the truest sense. Radical feminism, as prominent Indian academician Pramod K. Nayar states, "treats women as a class, or a *collective subject*. They see all women as linked by a common structure: patriarchal oppression. Sisterhood, therefore, became the code for this shared oppression" (Nayar 101). In other words, patriarchy is believed to be a universal phenomenon that exists and operates trans-historically and trans-culturally to oppress women in every social structure.

Discontented with the reformative approach of the liberal feminists of the 1960s, small groups of women in different parts of the United States started the strategy of 'consciousness raising' by meeting regularly to discuss the adverse effects of male supremacy and sexist oppression not only in the public spheres of their lives like profession and education, but, more importantly, on their private lives as well. These sharing and speaking up of sexual repressions, indignities and terrors that each of these women suffered everyday led them to be aware of their own power and strength as a collective group. Ultimately, this establishment of ties with other women and formation of sisterhood through mutual trust, support and appreciation provided them with the power to reject the patriarchal ideals and values of stereotyped womanhood. Noted British academic Chris Weedon has, in essence, astutely articulated that "radical feminist discourse attempted to develop a universally valid and trans-historical account of women's oppression under global patriarchy which could be the basis for a universal sisterhood" (Weedon 49).

The very concept of universal sisterhood has afterwards drawn severe criticism on the ground that it perceives women as a homogeneous and universal category rather than a heterogeneous group separated by significant determinants like race, caste, class, ethnicity, sexual preferences and orientations. This essentialist view of women as universal 'victims' disguises as well as misrepresents "the true nature of women's varied and complex social reality" (Hooks, "Feminist Theory" 44). The critics of universal sisterhood essentially hold the view that long-lasting and continued sisterly tie among women can only occur when the racial, class and ethnic divisions are acknowledged and exigent strategies are mapped out and implemented to encounter these divisions and differences. Using the metaphor of a garden that glows because of its ability to embrace diversity, Seitisho Rammutla in her article based on her personal reflection on the essential aspects needed for a meaningful sisterhood has written: ". . . sisterhood requires that we invest time in understanding each other's diverse backgrounds, needs and wants, strengths and weaknesses" (Rammutla 150). Moreover, stressing on the problematic of building women's coalition grounded on a fixed, universal and unified gender identity, Karla Hackstaff and Jennifer Pierce in their review of Robin Morgan's edited anthology of feminist writings *Sisterhood Is Global* (1984) have firmly criticized "Morgan's means and her tendency to 'totalize' women's experience" (Hackstaff and Pierce 202) and forcefully argued that "We need to pursue affinity or political coalition rather than identity as our means to liberation" (Hackstaff and Pierce 202). Hence, it goes without saying that the critics of radical feminism also accentuate the need for solidarity among women by acknowledging the fact that bonding with one another makes women empowered. Accordingly, instead of bonding with other women on

the basis of shared victimization, American feminist academician and social activist Bell Hooks perceptively opines that feminist movement should encourage women to form bond with other women on the basis of shared strength and resources since only this type of bonding reflects the true essence of sisterhood (Hooks, "Feminist Theory" 46). Only then women can prove the veracity of U.S. feminist Kathie Sarachild's slogan "Sisterhood is Powerful" by working together to build a rock-hard foundation for developing political camaraderie as well as fostering political commitment to a feminist movement aiming at ending sexist oppression. In her seminal essay "Sisterhood: Political Solidarity between Women", Hooks also emphatically advocates, "Solidarity strengthens resistance struggle. There can be no mass-based feminist movement to end sexist oppression without a united front – women must take the initiative and demonstrate the power of solidarity" (Hooks, "Sisterhood" 127). Thus, for feminist movement to grow and flourish, women as sisters must be united by shared interests and beliefs, united in their appreciation of diversity, united in their struggle to end sexist oppression and united in political solidarity (Hooks, "Feminist Theory" 67).

'Sisterhood' has always been a recurrent leitmotif in South Asian Women's writings. Though ancient myths and legends in this region abound in instances of women turning against and weighing down women, women writers here have always been alive with the creation of women characters who invariably draw strength for themselves in their struggle against sexist oppression by forming solidarity with fellow women. For instance, while we commonly find oppressive mothers-in-law running riot in the lives of their daughters-in law in South Asian women's narratives , as we find in Bangladeshi writer Selina Hossain's short story "Motijan's Daughters" in which the tyrannical mother-in-law Gulnoor makes her daughter-in-law Motijan's married life an absolutely distressing experience through repeated reproaches, affronts and tirades on Motijan, we also find numerous women characters who find strength and courage as well as a clearer idea about their destination in life by clinging to and by sharing with other women. Feroza Jussawala's essay "Sisterhood in South Asian Women's Writing" in which she traces out the nature and significance of sisterhood formed among women as a source of strength and empowerment in their struggle to survive the onslaughts of patriarchal oppression in the fictional works of Kamala Markandaya's *Two Virgins*, Rasana Atreya's *Tell a Thousand Lies* and Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* ends with her astute articulation:

It is often in the depicting of the lives of these women that the younger and newer authors have found their strength and survival, their sisterhood, power and daring. As each of these women characters or authors finds strength to break out from oppression

as a result of 'sisterhood' whether actual relationship, or a forged connection, we see the strength of South Asian women shine forth, whether in India or overseas. (Jussawala 30)

Indian-American novelist Thrity Umrigar's latest novel *The Secrets Between Us* (2018), a sequel of her acclaimed novel *The Space Between Us* (2005), is at its core a poignant and insightful tale of the power of amity and alliance between two aged women, Bhima and Parvati, who are hard-used by the complexities and misfortunes of life. This compelling novel, standing on its own right, brilliantly portrays two elderly women's struggles for survival facing innumerable odds in the metropolis of Mumbai, India. These two women, both with their tragic pasts and precarious present, find their two worlds intersecting in the most unexpected ways as they gradually forge a bond of sisterhood by sharing one another's secrets and by drawing upon each other's strengths. In the course of the novel, these two women's friendship embraces and enriches the lives of other women in the novel: Bhima's granddaughter Maya, the lesbian couple Sunita and Chitra, Bhima's former employer Sera Dubash, Sera's daughter Dinaz, and Bhima's widowed neighbour Bibi. All these women, though very heterogeneous in their age, social standing, class, caste and temperament, become united with the single motto of rediscovering their own strengths to find a new path of hope and dignity for their lives.

As the novel opens, poor and illiterate, Bhima, now fired of her job as a maid in the upper-middle-class Parsi household of Dubash family, is desperate to find out a new path for herself and her granddaughter Maya. Dinaz, the daughter of Sera Dubash, arrives in Bhima's hovel in a slum of Mumbai and presents Bhima with a cheque of forty thousand rupees for her decades of savings that have been in Serabai's keeping. Bhima decides to use the amount for Maya's college education so that she will be able to forge a better life for herself one day. As Bhima, who has long endured despair and loss with stoicism, is struggling in her own way with two more cleaning and cooking jobs at Sunitabai and Mrs. Motorcyclewalla's flats, the readers are introduced with the other main character Parvati, poorer and older than Bhima, who sleeps on the landing outside her nephew's flat and scrapes by on the small amount of leftover food she receives as charity from a nearby restaurant. Astute, practical, blasphemous, rude, defiant, cynical, bitter, proud and, most importantly, educated Parvati lives on selling her daily supply of six shriveled cauliflowers displayed on a dirty cotton sheet at a cornered open space on the pavement of the local market. These two elderly women with unflagging spirits, totally unlike each other in temperament yet both hiding lurid and appalling secrets of past grief and adversities in their hearts, moving beyond their initial mutual prejudices and suspicions

gradually form a bond of sisterhood between themselves with a view to making a difference not only in their own lives, but also in the lives of those who they care and love.

A considerable space of the plot is dedicated to unfold the tragic past of Parvati in different chapters, while Bhima's disconsolate past is scattered throughout the novel in the form of her dejected musings and conversation with other characters. Both have experienced bitter blows in their lives. At the beginning of the novel in a state of anger Maya describes the treatment of the Dubash family towards her grandmother: "They treat you like a dog, no, worse than a dog. They treat you like an old newspaper, something they read and then throw in the trash box" (Umrigar 15). In like manner, a harsh and disgruntled Parvati defines her fate by saying: "I am like this paper. People can write on me, spit on me, tear me up, it makes no difference" (Umrigar 112). Parvati is sold to prostitution at twelve by her desperately poor father "for the price of a cow" (Umrigar 17). She has passed more than two decades as a prostitute at the Old Place under the Principal who has absolute authority over her. Later, one of her regulars, a retired police officer, Rajesh asks her to marry him. Unfortunately enough, she trades one dreadful life for another, as she is regularly battered by her husband. She soon realizes that Rajesh has not married her out of love. He has married her just because he needs "a cook, a housecleaner, and someone to fuck" (Umrigar 232). Finally, her husband's death leaves her penniless and homeless at old age since she has not been mentioned in his will. Since then, she drags on her miserable and lonely existence in extreme penury to somehow make bare ends meet. Bhima and her daughter Pooja, on the other hand, have been left adrift and destitute in Mumbai by her once-loving husband Gopal who in sheer frustration returns to his ancestral village with their son Amit after being forced by destiny and tricked by the agent of the factory owner to leave his job due to an accident in which he seriously injures himself and loses his fingers. Later, Bhima also witnesses the shocking and painful deaths of her daughter and son-in-law due to AIDS. More appallingly, she has to bear up with the sexual abuse and subsequent abortion of Maya by her former employer Serabai's son-in-law Viraf. From then on, she intrepidly carries on her lone battle to keep herself and her granddaughter Maya afloat in a sea of troubles and other misfortunes in the megacity of Mumbai. Therefore, it seems that these two aging yet strong-willed women are destined to forge initially a business relationship, then a friendship and finally a bond of sisterhood that will eventually brighten up their lives with the warmth of joy, love, compassion, self-esteem and hope.

Bhima and Parvati's unlikely friendship starts in the most unexpected way. When one of Bhima's neighbor's in the slum, a fruit vendor, is killed in a sectarian violence, she finds herself helping the man's widowed wife Bibi with a large order of custard apples he has already paid for

before he gets killed. As Bhima decides to sell the consignment for the widow, she finds it more complicated than she has anticipated. Ultimately, with a young porter Rajeev's assistance, she ends up renting part of Parvati's space in the local market and, thus, needing help from the very woman whom she has earlier disregarded so many times. Parvati is also in desperate need of money to pay for her nightly accommodation at a brothel Tejpal Mahal when her nephew ousted her from the doorway of his apartment. At the beginning, it has been purely a business deal. Often, Parvati's rude and caustic remarks make Bhima irritated and flushed. However, as days pass, noticing in openmouthed wonder Parvati's mental strength, ingenuity, presence of mind, sense of judgment, practicality and nonchalant attitude in handling situations and people, Bhima realizes: "If she wishes to be successful, she will need the help of this irritating, querulous woman sitting across from her" (Umrigar 185). Soon, they find themselves as business partners in selling fruits and vegetables together at Vishnu's corner store and Parvati has become Bhima's "interpreter to the world, cutting up information into tiny slices that she can digest and comprehend" (Umrigar 213). What follows afterwards is a luminous passage of alliance and interdependence between two women who join hands to ensure their survival and achieve their dreams. As time passes, they peel away the layers of prejudices and qualms about each other from their hearts and start sharing their untold secrets and abysmal wounds that haunt them.

Finding a 'true sister' in each other for the first time, both the women piece together new lives for themselves with a sense of mutual love and respect. Moreover, Sunitibai and Chitra, the lesbian couple at whose house Bhima works as a maid, start treating Bhima and Maya as their own family. They relentlessly assist and guide Maya in her mission of becoming a successful lawyer. As a result, Bhima's initial inhibition about these two "unnatural women" (Umrigar 105) gradually evaporates and she feels "a strange solidarity with these two young women and their solitary life together" (Umrigar 157). Thus, Bhima in course of the novel finds and builds a real family comprising 'sisters' who, though belonging to different socio-cultural backgrounds, possess mutual respect, love, care and appreciation for each other's different strengths and assets. The celebration of sisterhood in Umrigar's *The Secrets Between Us* reminds us of Anita Nair's celebrated novel *Ladies Coupe*, in which the narrator and protagonist Akhila becomes animated with the potent realization about her own strength after listening to the shared tales of courageous struggle of five other completely unlike women in the S7 compartment of the Kanyakumari Express. Akhila, assimilating her own rebellious spirit with those of Sheela, Prabha, Janaki, Margaret and Marikolanthu, feels: "I am the same. I'm trying to define the reality of my life, justify my failures and my own sense of hopelessness by preying on the fabric of their

lives, seeking in it a similar thread that in some way will convert their lives with mine, make me feel less guilty for who I am and what I have let myself become" (Nair 136).

In *The Secrets Between Us*, Bhima and Parvati through forming an indelible bond of sisterhood between them truly demonstrate the resilience of the human spirit and the optimism that can be aspired when people reach out to each other. Their camaraderie exemplifies how one woman can make a huge difference in another woman's life simply by extending the hands of assistance and opening a heart of care, compassion and affection. During the time of the vandalism on the newly-built shopping center in the market area by the angry mob and the subsequent indiscriminate *lathi-charge* of the policemen, Bhima, in a spirit of great courage and concern, runs and reaches out for Parvati to bring her out of the turbulent sea of the melee. After this benumbing time of terror and turbulence, Bhima is just marveled by the realization that "Parvati was simply waiting for her to come find her" (Umrigar 182). Later when Parvati is very sick, it is Bhima who rescues her from the dungeon of the Tejpal Mahal and takes her to the hospital contrary to her constant objections. By seeing this sisterly love in Bhima, even a tough Parvati tells her, "I wish you had been my blood sister. Perhaps my life would've turned out differently" (Umrigar 222). They both have later spent intimate hours sharing their appalling secrets to each other holding each other's hands like two schoolgirls. In a way, Bhima and Parvati's bond of sorority is quite analogous to the reunion of five former college friends Krishna, Chitra, Sita, Bhadra and Lopa, each of whom are both physically and emotionally scarred by the vagaries of love, marriage, motherhood and sexual deceit in Bani Basu's story "Quintuplets". In Bani Basu's story, bond of sisterhood enables these five women to revivify themselves in their struggle to resist patriarchal oppression and discover the true essence of their individuality. The story ends with the following words as all five of them sit in a circle on the floor with their bodies touching each other's: "One by one the wrappers were falling off. Love, hope, shelter, respect. In the cruel wind the cast-off bloodied clothes were flying. Yet we were not absolutely stark. The deep chasm in the heart of the earth had come together again. The universe resonated with the notes of *Panchojonyo*. For us. For the five of us. After all we are Panchali" (Basu 93).

Towards the end of the novel, Bhima brings an ailing Parvati who is diagnosed as suffering from Cancer at the terminal stage in her shanty in the slum to take care of her. Together Maya and Bhima do everything possible in their capacity to shower Parvati's last few days with love, affection and care. Together, they build a family of different kind which is based not on biological kinship, but on the warmth of heart and solidarity of spirit. At the end, a dying Parvati makes Bhima promise to fulfill her last wish of sprinkling her ashes into the river of her ancestral village, Lodpur. She even craftily leaves a note and her savings with Maya to buy two train tickets

for her and Bhima. After Parvati's cremation, Bhima and Maya go to Lodpur and do everything as promised. In her note, Parvati asks Bhima to travel two more stations to visit Tipubag, her husband Gopal's home village. Like a true elder sister, Parvati's last benign trickery finally paves the path for Bhima to be reunited with her husband and son. Thus, while Bhima has found delight in sharing the little she possesses with Parvati, Parvati also in her own unique way provides Bhima with the bliss that she pines for all her life. Thus, Bhima and Parvati in course of Umrigar's novel have grown into benignant sisters, though not consanguineous, "when [they] come to see that [their] mutual survivals are at stake" (Brubaker 66). This empowering and elevating aspect of their 'sisterhood' ensures that *The Secrets Between Us* ends in an optimistic note: "Although it is dark, in Bhima's heart it is dawn" (Umrigar 357).

### **Conclusion**

Overall, Umrigar's moving yet empowering novel *The Secrets Between Us* besides bringing up the issues of poverty, class and caste systems, servitude, prostitution, sexual abuse, male domination and the grubby side of new emerging India, most significantly, upholds and celebrates the indomitable spirits of two ageing women who forge a bond of sisterhood to strengthen and affirm one another in their fight for survival and progress. To conclude, Bhima and Parvati's bond of sisterhood is an exemplification of the fact that regardless of initial reservations and closely guarded secrets, their strengths of hearts, intrepid resilience, shared interests, conjoint resources and mutual solidarity reciprocally empower them in their struggles against all sorts of obstacles and oppression.

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**BIO- NOTE**

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Tuhin Shuvra Sen is an Associate Professor at the Department of English, University of Chittagong, Bangladesh. He is currently a PhD researcher in the Department of English Literature at EFL University, Hyderabad, India. His PhD research explores postcolonial feminist issues in selected South Asian women's fictions. His research interest also includes colonial and postcolonial literature, gender and culture studies, and modern and postmodern literature.