Women's Friendships as Sites of Resistance: A Study of Two 'Bombay Novels'

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Abstract

Western Feminist studies have often conceptualized women's solidarity in terms of either sisterhood or lesbianism, thereby privileging institutionalized bonds or sexual ties over non-sexual, individual and volitional affective relationships like friendships. This paper attempts to argue that under patriarchy where there is little scope of women's self-identification except in relation to men, affective female homosocial ties like friendships which can slip through the frontiers of institutionalized or familial or any overtly political association can often transpire into sites of effective feminist resistance. This is especially significant where women's everyday lives are concerned in multicultural and politically contentious environments in Indian metropolitan cities like Mumbai. According to Heloise Brown and Graham Allan, socio-cultural approaches to women's friendships must take into account the historically and regionally-specific contexts in which they emerge as that would bear an influence on the dynamics of that friendship and by extension how far it enables the women involved therein to negotiate their way out or resist the specific patriarchy. Borrowing conceptualizations of literary portrayals of women's friendships by Elizabeth Abel and Judith K. Gardiner, this paper aims to explore the dynamics and possibilities of Indian women's friendships outside the conventional understanding of sisterhood, solidarity or lesbianism by undertaking a textual analysis of two 'Bombay novels': Thrity Umrigar's *The Space Between Us* (2005) and Sashi Deshpande's *The Binding Vine* (1993). Since the study takes a socio-cultural approach to women's friendships, this paper hopes to bring to light some of the ways in which women experience metropolitan urban locales in their everyday lives often from their domestic spaces itself and how such locales, in turn, influence their friendships.

Keywords: friendship, resistance, women, feminist, novel

Introduction

This paper aims to study the dynamics of inter-class friendships occurring between urban women to analyse their potential as sites of resistance and conviviality in their everyday-life through a reading two realist novels written by women of the same city: *The Binding Vine* (1993) by Shashi Deshpande and *The Space Between Us* (2006) by Thrity Umrigar. Under heteropatriarchy, where women's worth is still measured or validated through their relationships with men and their belonging to heteronormative families, friendships—either between women or between men and women become fascinating for the exploration of dynamics of possible subversion and resistance. Western Feminist studies have often conceptualized women's solidarity in terms of either sisterhood or

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lesbianism, thereby privileging institutionalized or familial bonds or sexual ties over non-sexual, individual and volitional affective relationships like friendships (Brown 191). A personal, informal and volitional tie like friendship is a peculiar bond inhabiting a shady space in the network of human relationships which can neither be defined nor be speculated on due to their volitional and non-institutional character. Their elusiveness arises from their mutability, or ability to overlap with other kinds of relationships. Probably this is the same reason why they go largely undocumented, taken for granted and usually inconsequential with regard to larger socio-cultural structures in which they are situated. They may be brief or fleeting or even short-lived encounters involving personal exchanges but they leave indelible marks on one or all of the participants.

Situating Women's Friendships in the City

Michel Foucault points out that "friendship is an important social formation as it signifies the possibility of functioning outside normative discourses, that are not easily possible within other relationships such as marriage or nuclear family." (Kathiravelu 15) Despite the agreed-upon general importance of friendship, women's friendships have often been trivialized and mocked and women have been portrayed as incapable of forming homosocial bonds as strong as men (Lips 210). Though some feminists have fought this assumption by showing that women's friendships can be deep and abiding, others like Pat O'Conner have warned against the essentialization of their friendships. (Brown 192).There is a need to account for the differential power dynamics existing in each friendship which recognizes the existence of conflicting feelings. Socio-cultural approaches to (women's) friendships tend to focus upon regionally or historically specific contexts which give rise to different forms of friendships. According to Graham Allan, "individuals do not generate their friendships in a social or economic vacuum, any more than they do it in a personal vacuum. Relationships have a broader basis than the dyad alone; they develop and endure within a wider complex of interacting influences which help to give each relationship its shape and structure." (Adams and Allan 2) This paper aims to highlight how these relationships or friendships in turn also have in them the potential to influence, affect or subvert the larger structures and hegemonies defined by caste, class and gender hierarchies. The central question that this paper aims to thereby raise through its reading of two fictional narratives is: If the resistance through politically conscious, strategic sisterhood based on commonalities of repressions has failed according to Bell Hooks (Hooks 43) due to the negligence of intersectional oppressions then can personal, affective and spontaneous bonds based on comparable experiences of oppression be more effective as a mode of resistance for women? In this context, it might be useful to refer to anthropologist Joan D. Koss-Chioino's concept of 'radical empathy' which creates in relationships "inter-subjective space where individuals, regardless of their prior relationships to one another, enter into intimate relation." (Caswell and Cifor 30) This paper intends to study whether friendships or relationships between women from different backgrounds can generate this sort of empathy for the 'other' that can effectively transform everyday friendships into viable sites of resistance.

The Bombay Novel

The study has taken two 'Bombay novels'. Mumbai is referred to as Bombay throughout the two novels take up for study here. Priyamvada Gopal, in *The Indian English Novel:*

Nation, History and Narration elaborates on what constitutes the 'Bombay novel' in the chapter 'Bombay and the Novel' (Gopal 116). The idea that Bombay novel forms a sub-genre of the Indian English novel comes from her and other scholars like Bill Ashcroft (specifically from his paper, 'Urbanity, Mobility and Bombay: Reading the Postcolonial City'). The usage of the phrase in this study also indicates the specific patriarchy of the modern city which continuously impinges upon the lives of its women and affects the friendships, they form in it. Maryam Mirza in her book, 'Intimate Class Acts: Friendship and Desire in Indian and Pakistani Women's Fiction', negates the possibility of inter-class friendships or solidarity (Mirza). While not dismissing her conclusion, this paper views friendship as a journey, rather than an end. The impermanence or the flaws in the bonds should not overlook the instances of support that they did provide. While class and ethnicity come across as the barriers in the cases under consideration, friendships between similarly advantaged women are seldom perfect themselves, hence this reading focuses on the site of friendship and its possibilities for urban women in their everyday lives rather than the structural inhibitions to the same. Bombay/Mumbai forms an integral element in the works of both Thrity Umirgar and Sashi Deshpande. Both women focus on the lives of women from middle-class and lower-class Mumbai and the friendships they involuntarily end up forming via encounters necessitated and facilitated dynamics of the city itself. Paulina Palmer observes that there are two common approaches to women's friendships: political and psychoanalytical. While the former is concerned with bonding for overcoming patriarchy, the latter pays no attention to the political or collective aspects about relations between women, rather delve into the personal and psychological nuances of women's friendships, foregrounding their problems as well as their positive features (Hollinger 8). However, as the paper's analysis will portray, the two are often more intimately connected than previously thought to be, aligned with the feminist notion: 'the personal is political'[1]. When this idea is combined with Allan's approach, as mentioned earlier, through the socio-cultural context in which the friendship is taking place, then we come to the understanding that despite kyriarchy[2], personal bonds between individuals (women) and larger (in this case, urban) hegemonies are co-constitutive. Though this may bode a sense of the impossibility of meaningful resistive solidarities, it is also not without hope as friendship by nature is not always just transactional but also emotional and impulsive. It is because of its spontaneous, informal, and non- institutional nature that it can lend itself as potential sites of resistance for women.

Textual Analysis of the Selected Bombay Novels

Urmila in *The Binding Vine* and Sera in *The Space Between Us* lives are compulsorily centred around their marital families and their children not just because of structural or social barriers but also because of their own emotional entanglements with them. Friendship is a slippery tie, blending and merging into and with other ties and associations and both the novels have several instances of friendships and we find each of them gets complicated and strained due to the necessities of family ties, especially when the potential friendships emerge from antagonistic spheres or classes as is portrayed in the dynamics of the friendships between Shakutai and Urmila in Deshpande's *The Binding Vine* and that between Sera and Bhima in Umrigar's *The Space Between Us*.

Deshpande's *The Binding Vine* opens with Urmila, college-lecturer and mother of two, grieving the death of her infant daughter and suffering from loneliness due to her absent

husband, Kishore who works in the merchant navy. (Deshpande) Around the same time, she accidentally comes upon a trunk containing her mother-in-law, Mira's diaries and poems while clearing the house. Not much later, at the hospital where Vanaa works, she comes across Shakuntala or Shakutai whose daughter Kalpana has been raped. Before she knows, Urmila finds herself get spontaneously entangled in the lives of Shakutai and Mira who she recovers through the perusal of her poetry. On reading Mira's poems and diaries, Urmila realizes that even Mira was a victim of rape before dying during childbirth at twenty-two. The only difference between her and Kalpana's experiences was that while the former was raped by her husband, within the protected and acceptable realm of a bourgeoisie marriage, *chawl*-resident Kalpana, hailing from a proletariat background, was raped by a yet-to-be recognized man. Urmila, the aggrieved mother, lonely wife, affable sister-in-law and benevolent employer is deeply moved by the words of her late mother-in-law, a painfully repressed talented poet and a victim of marital rape and by the plight of Shakutai and her near-dead daughter Kalpana who has been violated in a gruesome manner. She gets involved in the lives of Shakutai and Kalpana after this, at the expense of her familial obligations. But even before the drastic event of the rape, the fact that domestic workers in urban middle-class households often become more than mere physical assistants is adequately highlighted by both Deshpande and Umrigar.

Friendship, unlike family ties, is slippery, non-obligatory and noncommittal in nature. Therefore, it often becomes a site for authentic self-expression for its participants. For instance, early in *The Binding Vine*, when Urmila's marital family is trying to cope with the death of infant Anu, Urmila's mother, Inni cries out: "I've told you many times let's call Shanta back, even if there's no work for her at least I'll have someone to talk to. I know I'm a burden to you, but I'm helpless, I have no one." (Deshpande 69) It is interesting how Inni feels she has no one even though she lives with her family and daughter-in-law Urmila and her children and is often visited by her daughter Vanaa. The sense of alienation that modern cities are thought to evoke is seen to permeate into their domestic spaces inhabited by apparently functional families even in a cultural space like middle-class Bombay where filial ties are meant to dominate.

Another instance where friendship comes into tension with family ties is seen in the bond between Urmila and her childhood friend Vanaa who presently happens to be her sister-in-law. The protagonist-narrator comments on this directly when she is challenged by Inni who suspects that Urmila married Kishore to stay close to Vanaa:

> "...I didn't need to be related to Vanaa. In fact, by marrying Kishore, I distanced myself from her; as if she, as Kishore's sister, and I, as Kishore's wife, moved away from each other, Kishore coming between us. We've managed to bridge the gap by silence."(Deshpande 79)

Whereas earlier, in their youth, their close compatibility made people mistake them to be cousins or sisters. Here too the narrator negates their assumptions: "But there is a greater ease between us than there is between sisters or cousins. I've noticed a kind of tension between sisters..There is none of that between us." (Deshpande 79) This attests to the fact that it is not that women are not able to form strong homosocial bonds but that their friendships are often interrupted by patriarchy and their emotional and practical compulsion to ally with patrilineal and patriarchal family units which are in turn tied to class-caste networks defining the modern nation-state. The family versus friendship tension gets more intense when Urmila goes out of her way to help Shakutai and Kalpana. It is also irrevocably strained when she expresses the desire to publish Mira's poems

which implicate her father-in-law as a violent and abusive man. The latter decision comes towards the end after she witnesses the experiences of other women or friends. She does not, however, do any of this consciously, unlike her friend Priti who deliberately attempts to forge solidarities not out of sincere empathy but for self-gratification, labels, films to her name and awards. Being with Shakutai at the hospital or accompanying her to her slum-residence and giving her comfort and assistance is probably Urmila's way of coming to terms with the death of her Anu. But she sits and listens to Shakutai vent and reminiscence about her own life and tragedies. She herself is not fully clear about what makes her walk an extra mile for this family with who she has otherwise very little to do, especially when it comes in direct conflict with her own family's concerns.

The spontaneous aspect of the bond between Urmila and Shakutai is not unmarred by their different class positions. Despite their consciousness about their alarming differences, Shakutai and Urmila reach out to each other. But what is revealing in this dyad is that while Shakutai unveils almost everything about her personal life to Urmila, the latter listens and helps but does not unburden her sorrows or pains to Shakutai. She attempts to enlighten her about why Kalpana's rape is not a result of her own fault and is constantly by her side each time Shakutai breaks down inconsolably, but Urmila herself is starkly silent when it comes to her own marital woes or childhood traumas. She does not break down before Shakutai either. She does so before Vanaa and before Bhaskar. The narrator's unconscious class-bias makes her empathetic enough to reach out to Shakutai and lend her an ear but prevents her from coming to that level of intimacy with her at the same time. It could be questioned how far Urmila's empathy towards Shakuntala is an educated response of a conscious academician woman to the woes of a have-not. Once when Shakutai was busy showing her old photographs and talking about her life and relationships, the narrator says "The mother and daughter [Sandhya] exclaim and chatter over each photograph, I make appropriate comments". (Deshpande 145) This shows that despite her attempt to understand, she was unable to relate to Shakuntala's feelings and concerns as a lower class and poorly educated woman. Her attempt to educate and enlighten Shakutai about how she should reject the shame and accept her daughter and not blame her for being the survivor reaches a climactic point when she makes her report to the media about the event as a bid to protect her daughter ousted from the hospital to accommodate other patients. The media report generates public interest and reinvigorates its investigation but the uncomfortable truth it reveals about the identity of the rapist (who happens to be Shakutai's brother-in-law) shatters Shakutai as her sister, Sulu commits suicide. The sensationalizing media worsens matters for Kalpana and Shakuntala, but it also incites a public outcry against structural injustices. Urmila's experience with Kalpana and Shakutai makes her decide to publicize Mira's truth as well. Urmila justifies her stance to Vana in this way:

> "...Then I saw Kalpana and I met Shakutai, I read Mira's diary, her poems. And I've begun to think yes, I've managed, but I've been lucky, that's all. While these women…They never had the chance. It's not fair at all. And we can't go on pushing it –what happened to them –under the carpet forever because we're afraid of disgrace''(Deshpande 174)

It is not told what trajectories Kalpana and Shakutai's lives ultimately take, or whether Urmila ultimately follows through her decision of publishing Mira's poems even with Kishore disapproval of the same. But the friendship forged between Urmila and Shakutai, two women from completely different backgrounds, open up possibilities for change

and resistance and infuses meaning in the drab, alienating and otherwise purely transactional space of the city of Bombay.

Laavanya Kathiravelu in her paper 'Friendships and Urban Encounter' points out that though friendships is a private affiliation, it is a way in citizenship can be performed within a privatized home sphere, "where larger national solidarities become a part of an intimate zone" (Kathiravelu 13). This bears particular significance in the case of friendship-like intimacies that form between domestic-helps and their employers. The narrative of *The Space Between Us* goes back and forth in time to relate the events in the paradoxically intersecting and parallel lives of primarily two women, Sera and Bhima. (Umrigar) It opens with old lower-caste Bhima in her tiny slum-shelter, preparing herself to start for her work-place, which is Sera Dubash's upper-middle-class comfortable apartment in a nearby high-rise. Bhima stays with and take care or works for her orphan granddaughter Maya who, it is told at the very beginning, has been left pregnant by an undisclosed rapist. Bhima has been working for Sera Dubash for decades now and both are intimately involved with each other's lives going beyond the purely transactional nature of their employee-employer bond. This is partly due to the nature of the care-based work that Bhima does at Sera Dubash's household, work which women do as a labour of love by default in their own households: such as preparing breakfast for the family before and so that the members can leave for work on time, taking care of the young ones while the elders remain busy. what results is a long-standing bond between these two women who are often forced to choose between their familial ties and their unspoken loyalty for one another. "This is what Sera appreciates most about Bhima—this unspoken language, this intimacy that has developed between them over the years." (Umrigar 17)

Shakuntala's marriage in Deshpande's narrative had broken as her husband refused to work despite moving to the city, Bhima's husband Gopal, in Umrigar's novel, similarly opted out of the responsibility of taking care. So for Bhima, her only family, future and hope is her granddaughter Maya. But the novel opens with Bhima's bitterness at Maya because she perceives her as a traitor for getting herself pregnant before finishing college. On the other hand, Sera Dubash, confident, educated and professional middle-class Parsee hailing from a well-to-do scientist family married Feroz out of love and personal choice but found herself in a harrowingly abusive and violent marriage from which she could never escape until their complete separation as a coupled unit from the Dubash household and until the death of Feroz. For Sera, her hope, the reason for living and meaning of existence revolves around her daughter Dinaz. It is this commonality that binds Bhima and Sera as well as gets instrumental in separating them from each other. Having worked for Sera's household since the time when Sera was a new bride, Bhima has been a witness to many of her personal plights. There have been times in the past when:

> "the house felt like a tomblike, encased in silence, a silence that prevented her from reaching out to others, from sharing her darkest secret with even her closest friends. When Bhima was the only one who knew, the only one who felt the dampness of the pillowcase after long nights of shedding hot tears, the only one who heard the muffled sounds coming from her and Feroz's bedroom."(Umrigar 18)

The dynamics of their friendship is a complex one. It is interrupted or persuaded by not just by their loyalties to their own families but also the irreparable 'space between them', the differences in class and community keep impinging on their need to bond. This manifests in everyday lives, for example when Viraf, Sera's son-in-law offers to buy a

dishwasher for the household, Sera prevents it as she is concerned about their money being wasted on something that her well-paid Bhima can do anyway at a time when her daughter is expecting. The discrepancies in Sera's treatment towards Bhima does not go unnoticed by the latter. However Bhima's "sense of fair play and stout affection for the Dubash family takes over" as she recognizes the Sera's acts of patronizing charity like giving money for a cab ride or helping her with Maya's education and standing by them during this critical phase of Maya's pregnancy out of wedlock. These acts by themselves mean a great deal to a woman whose own family has deserted her. This is not just for the present calamitous news, but Sera and her daughter, Dinaz have been helpful and affectionate towards Bhima almost to a fault according to Feroz and their neighbours, some of whose prejudice, Sera herself shares. When young Dinaz consciously incites Bhima to ask for a raise in her wage, Sera rebukes her. On a day to day matters, the fact that Bhima resides in the filthy slum, without adequate running water or privacy causes a gaping divide between the two women. The divide reaches to the extent of near untouchability despite their emotional frankness to each other, Sera finds it difficult to allow Bhima to use their furniture:

> "The thought of Bhima sitting on the furniture repulses her. The thought makes her stiffen, the same way she had tensed the day she caught her daughter...giving Bhima an affectionate hug... [Sera] had to suppress the urge to order her daughter to go wash her hands." (Umrigar 29)

Much of this revulsion and Sera's compulsory alienation from Bhima is structural as it is personal. Even the little kindness that Sera shows to Bhima is often questioned and noted by her neighbours and friends and is criticized by her husband Feroz. Sera has to evoke the angry image of Feroz to check Dinaz from being what she perceives to be, excessively kind towards Bhima. Once when Dinaz shows her affection toward the more available Bhima than she does to her father, who is absent half the time for work, Feroz bellows:

> "That woman is brainwashing our only child under your very nose, and you are too complacent and stupid to even notice. Dinaz talks nicer to Bhima than she does to her own daddy" (Umrigar 68)

And yet it is this same outcaste and outsider Bhima who was the only one around to comfort Sera in her younger days when she used to be badly beaten and bruised by Feroz. She would make curative concoctions and apply on her wounds and gently massage her body into restive slumber. She was even sensitive enough to never to talk about them or refer to the cause of the wounds. Sera would return the favour by paying Bhima visits to her slum when the latter was ailing from typhoid fever and had nursed Bhima back to health by taking her to see their family doctor. Even as she brought Bhima from the slum to her own apartment during her fever, she could not be generous or egalitarian enough to offer her a bed to sleep on. Both Bhima and Maya had to sleep on the floor for the anxiety of their class-location creeps into their bond: "Each time she thought of the slum, she recoiled from Bhima's presence, as if the woman had come to embody everything that was repulsive about that place.." (Umrigar 115) Sera has been consistently helpful to Bhima about Maya's education and upbringing as well. When Maya is found to be pregnant, it is Sera and her family who gives her the assistance she needs to get the unwanted fetus hastily aborted. In several such instances, Bhima's friendship with upper-middle-class educated Sera enables her to be the beneficiary of those rights and services (like quality education and healthcare and relevant information) which should be available to all citizens of the country.

Despite the egalitarian potential of their bond, it is far from being sincerely emancipatory. Outwardly Sera's assistance to Bhima's granddaughter to get safe abortion seems benevolent. But at a time when her daughter is happily pregnant, Sera lacks the empathy to understand the loss that Maya, herself feels in the process. Right from Feroz's death to Dinaz's pregnancy, Sera has Bhima to take care of her and offer her a quiet companionship and conduit for the former's wellbeing. Bhima also feels indebted to Sera for the countless number of times, she tried to help her, even if the attempts are infused with problematic feelings. This innate sense of gratitude along with the fear of being disbelieved prevents Bhima from going all out with the terrible truth that she uncovers about the real cause behind Maya's pregnancy to Sera and her family. Even as it burns her insides, she cannot confide in Sera that it is her own respectable and beloved son-in-law, husband of her only daughter who is responsible for the rape that has resulted into Maya's pregnancy which they had to get aborted. Maya makes a vitally revealing comment on the relationship between Bhima and Sera when she is scolded for the umpteenth time for appearing to be ungratefully rude towards Sera: "...My parents were sending me to school in Delhi. Serabai just wanted to believe I was a dum-dum she could save. And as for my clothes and food – for that, I'm grateful to you, not to her. It is your sweat and hard work that produce them, not Serabai's generosity. If you stopped going to work for a month, let us see if she would send you your salary in the mail." (Umrigar 269)

Sera and Bhima's bond has the potential for solidarity based on a quiet understanding. Sera spontaneously reads Bhima's dark thoughts and observes: "I know what you mean, but Bhima we women, we live for so much more than just ourselves. You for Maya, I for Dinaz and, now the new baby...women don't live for themselves..."(Umrigar 296) However, whatever potential this bond had, either of resistance or solidarity is cruelly and expectedly aborted by familial affiliations and deceptions. After Viraaf, Sera's son-in-law finds out that Bhima knows about his crime, he hatches a plan to portray her as a thief, which provokes her to the extreme extent of calling him out for his vileness. When confronted with the terrible truth which threatens to end her daughter's apparently happy marriage, and egged on by Viraf's manipulative assertions, Sera sides with Viraf and dismisses Bhima from her service, and in effect from the long-standing 'friendship'.

Conclusion

What is seen in these two novels is that though not always enduring or without problems, these friendships forged in an urban milieu of Bombay enable the women to survive and go on in different ways, in various stages of their lives. Sometimes they can also generate larger movements of resistance and visibility as is seen in *The Binding Vine*. At other times, as in *The Space Between Us*, even when they fail to culminate into meaningful space for resistance, they prove themselves to be potentially subversive and potent enough to demand attention and machination of the traditionally more secure filial relations to abort them. Therefore affective associations like friendships help to locate the agency of resistance in individual women themselves through whatever means that are accessible to them as fundamental structural changes may take lifetimes of struggle.

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Notes

[1] The personal is political' is also termed as 'the private is political' first appeared as the title of Carol Hanisch's essay published in 'Notes from the Second Year: Women's Liberation'. Hanisch herself credited editors, Shulamith Firestone and Anne Koedt for the formulation. This became a rallying cry for feminists later to emphasize what the essay too highlighted: "personal problems [issues] are political problems'' (Gupta, Open Democracy: Free Thinking for the World)

[2] Kyriarchy', conceptualized by Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, describes a system of "interlocking structures of domination" that is not based on just gender but other intersectional categories like class, race, ethnicity, colour, caste etc. (Osborne 11)

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