

**Journey from Bombay to Cleveland:
Multicultural Struggle in If Today Be Sweet
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ABSTRACT:

This Research paper presents the struggle of people whose life is trapped in Multicultural society, through the life of protagonist of the novel Tehmina Sethna, a Parsi widow from Bombay who travels to suburban Cleveland to live with her son Sorab and his American family. Thrity Umrigar born in 1961 at Bombay in Parsi community. As she born and brought up in Parsi community, it developed her awareness about cultural differences, cultural identity, traditions and problems of minority classes. She has worked as novelist, essayist and journalist. She explored themes like identity crisis, migration, nostalgia, hybridity, social inequality, women's struggle and multiculturalism from her writings. Umrigar highlights multiculturalism through the cultural interactions, memories of Bombay and lifestyle in Ohio, America. In the novel If Today Be Sweet Umrigar highlights multiculturalism as a harmonious coexistence as well as uneven process of negotiation.

KEYWORDS:

Multiculturalism, identity crisis, nostalgia, migration, Thrity Umrigar.

Introduction:

Thrity Umrigar's *If Today Be Sweet* (2008) is a story of Tehmina Sethna, an old Parsi woman whose has lost her husband recently. It is so difficult for her to live alone in India with the memories of her husband in her old home Bombay. Her son Sorabh settled in Ohio America along with American wife and son.

Tehmina decided to visit Ohio to forget the pain. The novel presents wonderful combination of her memories of Bombay and her quest for identity in America. This research paper explores various multicultural aspects like loneliness, migration, belongingness, assimilation, negotiation and identity crisis.

Cultural Howling and Rituals:

Novel revolved around the major theme of grief of Tehmina sethna for death of her beloved husband Rustom and the cultural rituals regarding that. But in America she can't openly lament for the death of her husband. For instance, when Tehmina says Susan to observe mourning rituals for her late husband, Susan finds them unnecessary. She never observed such things in America. Tehmina did unsuccessful efforts to convince her. Tehmina remarks,

“Here they think mourning is something to be done quickly, in private, and then shut away like a broken toy. But in Bombay, grief is public—it is shared, sung, and ritualized.” (Umrigar 63).

Further she is unable to explain that mourning is not just a ritual it is a way to open the feelings of gratitude for lost person. So she said,

“How can I explain to Susan that mourning is not just for the dead but for the living—that rituals are the bridge that keep us whole?” (Umrigar 77).

Cultural Identity Markers in the novel – Clothing, Food and Traditions

Many cultural markers like dressing style, food habits, language used by Thrity Umarigar to presents cultural differences. For instance Tehmina was wearing saree in Cleveland due to that she stands out differently in America. She observed that whenever she goes out American are staring at her due to her dressing style. She says,

“She felt the fabric announce her difference, like a banner

proclaiming: foreigner, foreigner” (95).

Tehmina eats Parsi food and insists her daughter– in–law to prepare Parsi food. But Susan feels it alien and difficult to prepare. Rather than Indian food she was more comfortable with Pizza and Hamburger. These examples show how multiculturalism was creating dilemma while making choices in daily life. It was tough choice between decisions about whether to assimilate in new society or preserve cultural distinctiveness.

Multiculturalism in the Family:

After death of husband Tehmina came to America and started her new life in Ohio, America. She spent her whole life in overcrowded city Mumbai, where she was surrounded by her relatives, friends and neighbours. She was feeling alienated in the Sorabh’s home in Ohio. It was difficult for her to adapt new American culture. Household work became first place where multiculturalism was tested. Sorabh fully assimilated in American professional life style. His wife was American and it was become difficult for her to adjust with typical Indian Parsi lady. As both were equally expressive, they openly expressed disagreements about foreign culture. This disagreement between Tehmina and her daughter in law represents the cultural clashes between them. She felt Tehmina’s presence cum interference in daily household work is little bit irritating. She struggles to understand Parsi rituals and dietary rules. Susan offers her Hamburger which is opposite of Parsi dietary rules. So Tehmina disliked that and gave bitter reply to her,

“In her eagerness to please, Susan had forgotten that food is memory, food is identity” (Umrigar 119).

Sorab negotiates between his mother and his wife, is representing a hybrid identity that both connects him to his cultural roots and distances him from them. As Ghosh point out that, such micro–conflicts reflect the everyday labor of multicultural living (121). Umrigar depicts how multiculturalism begins in intimate

spaces and is fraught with unequal expectations.

Memory, Nostalgia, Cultural Continuity and displacement:

Tehmina's grief over the death of her beloved husband is unimaginable. But her feeling of nostalgia was giving the similar pain. Many nights she spent sleepless in the memory of her near and dear people from Bombay. She speaks about cultural richness of Parsi community in India. She remembers community gatherings which provides her emotional warmth. She says,

“In Bombay, even sorrow was communal—you wept with neighbors, with cousins, with the entire colony. Here, sorrow sits alone with you at the dining table” (Umrigar 132).

She enthusiastically talks about social gathering, temples in Bombay and Bombay streets. She feels alienated in her son's home. She said that,

“In Bombay, every morning had a rhythm, the voices of neighbors, the chanting from the temple, the smell of spices from the kitchen. Here, the silence is deafening” (Umrigar 45).

This comparison presents how badly she was feeling dislocated from her roots. Pandey argues that Tehmina embodies ‘the emotional dimension of migration, where cultural survival is tied to remembrance’ (49). For her, multiculturalism involves not only tolerance of difference but the survival of fragile communal practices. Language difference also made Tehmina's life complicated in America. She usually says ,

“Her words, perfectly clear in her head, came out clumsy in this foreign land. English was her friend in India but her betrayer in America” (Umrigar 161).

Tehmina Sethana as a ‘Good Indian’

Tehmina saved two young boys from ill treatment of their mother which is considered illegal in America. Her story became headline in all newspaper with heading – Indian Tehmina saved boys.

The novel critiques how American media constructs the immigrant image. She became model immigrant who ignored her own grief. This reflects how multiculturalism often privileges success stories while erasing discomfort, grief, and cultural difference. Tehmina observed that Susan and Sorabh raising their son very delicately. It was contrasting to Indian parenting. So “She wanted to tell Susan that children are not glass—they will not break if you scold them. In Bombay, a slap was sometimes a blessing, meant to guide, not to harm.” (Umrigar 147).

Parsi Identity and Minority Instability:

Tehmina is the representative of The Parsis, already a small and dwindling community in India. She often worries about future of her community. She laments,

“We Parsis are already disappearing in India—here in America, who will light the sacred fire?” (Umrigar 211).

She thinks that next generation Sorobh will forget the culture of Parsi Community. She was thinking that in next few years people will forget rituals of her small community. Often she says,

“America had made her son a stranger to her—an efficient, busy man who no longer understood the value of ritual”(Umrigar 102)

Day by day minority groups like Parsi community is becoming weaker. So the preservation of these groups became a need of hour. This is the only way to keep intact uniqueness of our nation.

Hybridity and Negotiated Belonging:

Tehmina speaks broken English with Parsi expressions and sometimes adds Gujarati words also. It reflects her hybrid identity. But she never completely abandoned her Indian roots, she gradually adapted American way. It shows her optimistic attitude and welcoming tone toward foreign culture. Even Sorabh’s lifestyle is also hybrid. The novel resists narratives of complete assimilation.

Tehmina feels that Indian are more religious than American she noticed that,

“In Bombay, even the air was thick with gods—you could not walk ten steps without meeting Ganesh or Hanuman. Here, the air is godless, sterile.” (Umrigar 210).

It shows her lament for religious identity. She also compares different styles to consol any widow in India and America. She observed that,

“In Bombay, people would have pitied her, brought her food, urged her to rest. Here, they ask what hobbies she has taken up, as if grief could be conquered with knitting.” (Umrigar 88).

Cultural misunderstanding is discussed in the novel at one point, Susan suggests donating Rustom’s possessions to charity. Tehmina is horrified. She felt that it was so difficult to her to convey her feelings towards her daughter-in-law. She said,

“How could she explain that every object held memory, that the worn shirt was as sacred as ashes in an urn?” (Umrigar 124).

This conversation presents practical nature of Susan Vs emotional attachment of Tehmina. At the concluding point of the novel we can see cultural adaptation of Tehmina with little hope of change. So Umarigar concludes novel with, “Perhaps Susan’s world and hers did not have to collide; perhaps they could run side by side, two rivers feeding the same sea.” (Umrigar 273).

If Today Be Sweet complicates the optimistic vision of multiculturalism as peaceful coexistence. Instead, it reveals the emotional, cultural, and structural costs of belonging. Domestic frictions, disrupted rituals, media stereotyping, and minority fragility underscore that multiculturalism is an uneven process shaped by power and negotiation. Umrigar demonstrates that true multiculturalism cannot ignore the lived struggles of minorities, particularly elders and micro-communities.

Conclusion:

With Tehmina's example Novel *If Today Be Sweet* presents the various aspect of multiculturalism. It represents cultural clashes, cultural differences, identity crisis, migration, sense of belongingness and minority traditions. Novel presents multiculturalism as a fragile, negotiated, and emotionally charged process. Through Tehmina Sethna's journey, the novel highlights how belonging is contested in intimate households, public narratives, and community survival. Rather than depicting assimilation as success, Umrigar underscores that identity is an ongoing negotiation shaped by grief, memory, and cultural precariousness.

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