Revealing Fictions: Neo-liberalism, Domestic Servants, and Thrity Umrigar’s *The Space Between Us*

Abstract: This article focuses on the diasporic Indian writer Thrity Umrigar’s notable novel *The Space Between Us* (2007), situating the text in the literary context of the post-colonial Anglophone novel, India’s regional tradition of social realism, as well as its liberalized economy and growing class divides. I argue that the novel is exemplary of a growing body of contemporary Anglophone writing from the Global South that centers the figure of the domestic servant in order to problematize the cultural and economic structures that subjugate her. In focusing on these marginalized and dispossessed individuals, texts like *The Space Between Us* reveal the fictional nature of the discourses of capitalist ‘development’ that neo-liberal globalization is based on. The novel illuminates the oppression of the domestic worker by highlighting how these modern discourses enable the sale of her entire body to the employer so that it can be directed to sit, stand, and embody subjugation and difference in culturally specific ways. I then argue that the novel *recuperates* an alternative ethics of being by conceptualizing the body as a vehicle between, rather than a mode of segregating, ‘self’ and ‘other.’ In the process, the text teaches the middle class Indian reader to see herself differently – as an agent of exploitation – in a way that leads her to see the servant ‘other’ differently – as someone akin to, rather than different from, her ‘self.’ Umrigar’s cultural work aims to destabilize capitalist modes of evaluating laborers and labor and to shift readers’ ways of seeing, thereby inciting ethical action in specific post-colonial contexts.

Keywords: domestic servants, subaltern representation, Thrity Umrigar, neo-liberal globalization in India, South Asian fiction in English, Post-colonialism, The Space Between Us

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In a passage at the heart of her novel, *The Space Between Us* (2005), the diasporic Indian writer Thrity Umrigar describes the changes wrought on the everyday lives of urban Indians as a result of economic liberalization. Set in post-colonial Mumbai and written for an audience of educated Indians and non-Indians, the novel investigates increasing social divisions through an institution that embodies economic inequality: domestic servitude. Significantly, the story is largely told from the perspective of Bhima, the longtime housekeeper of a middle-class Parsi widow named Serabai. At the novel's start, Bhima’s orphaned granddaughter Maya, the first in the family to get a proper education, has fallen pregnant and dropped out of college. Fortunately, Sera is generous. She has sponsored Bhima's granddaughter through school, and she now proposes to help the girl obtain an abortion. Meanwhile, Sera's friends tease her for treating Bhima “like she is the Kohinoor diamond” (170). But Sera is careful to maintain limits on her relationship with her housekeeper. In Sera's home, Bhima drinks from a special glass "that is kept aside for her," and she “squats on the floor rather than use a chair" (36). When Bhima finally reveals that Maya’s pregnancy was the result of being raped by Sera’s son in law, Sera fires Bhima, choosing to believe her son-in-law’s obvious lie over her servant’s obvious truth.

Umrigar tells this story in the mode of social realism, which has a global lineage ranging from Zola to Tolstoy and Dickens, via Premchand and Mulk Raj Anand (most prominently) in India. While varying in terms of aesthetic practices, realist narrative clings to the hope that it is possible to represent social reality, and to do so in a way that enables reflection and change. An attention to the surface materiality of things, including the ethnographic documentation of culture enables insights into the way that reality is produced by power, and thereby produces ethical actions towards altering that reality.

Specifically, *The Space Between Us* can be read as part of the long Indian tradition of the social realist novel that was inaugurated by writers, including Premchand, of the Progressive Writers Association. This group, writing in the first half of the twentieth century, pushed at the boundaries of upper middle class morality in order to convey ideologies of gender and caste based uplift and reform. As Priyamvada Gopal writes of the group, “Realism, within this framework, is less an aesthetic technique than a philosophy that brings together an affective sense of justice, fairness and harmony with an understanding of all that violates that sense” (27). In telling the story of the female domestic servant from the servant’s own perspective rather than her middle class employer’s, *The Space Between Us* participates in the goal of these writers, who aimed to expand the definition of who was to count as the modern individual of novelistic storytelling. In embodying the servant’s perspective the narrative voice also orchestrates what Ashish Rajyadhaksha describes as “democratic realism;” while a state realism mimics an authorial vantage point, a disciplinary gaze; a democratic one is embedded and localized, the insider’s view (Rajyadaksha, 296-317).

While drawing on this regional lineage of social realism, *The Space Between Us* also owes something to the European novel, for it participates in what György Lukács identifies as the Russian novel’s interest in the integrity and totality of the social sphere (Lukács, 151). Indeed, the novel is revelatory, seeking to display the totality of the social whole that lies beneath the characters’ thoughts and actions. It therefore pays attention to the intertwined lives of Sera and Bhima, including the role that class structures play in producing Sera’s discriminatory decisions and behavior.

This article argues that the novel’s representational choices are symptomatic of a larger trend within post-colonial Anglophone literatures that have also begun bringing the figure of the domestic servant from narrative periphery to center.[[1]](#endnote-1) As Ambreen Hai notes, such fiction includes a whole spate of recent titles, many of them set in South Asia and all in the Global South; Aravind Adiga’s *White Tiger* (2008), [[2]](#endnote-2) Romesh Gunesekera’s *Reef* (1994), Joseph O’Neill’s *The Dog* (2014), Chimamanda Adichie’s *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006), and Daniyal Mueenuddin’s collection of short stories *In Other Rooms* (2009)*.* This series of novels, as Hai elaborates, is different from the legacy of a British literary tradition that represents domestic servants not for their own sakes but primarily to serve aesthetic or narratival purposes, including serving as a foil to the protagonist, serving as comic relief, enabling the plot, bearing witness, telling the master’s story, and providing context. This wave of literature is also different to earlier South Asian narratives from the 1940s to the 1980s, which cast servant figures as necessary *background* for the trials faced by a nation on the verge of becoming independent or for the emergence of a postcolonial elite.[[3]](#endnote-3) And the domestic servant narratives written and set in the first decades of the new millennium are also different from colonial/postcolonial domestic servant narratives such as Ousmane Sembene’s Senegalese film *Black Girl* (1966) and Marlene van Niekerk’s South African novel *Agaat* (2004), within which characters function as representative microcosms of the racial and social inequalities of colonialism. In *Agaat,* for instance, the white mistress and black servant figures embody the complexities of apartheid, together inscribing upon each other a scroll of wrongs, betrayals and sacrifices that symbolize the psychological trauma of a divided nation as a whole.

By contrast, the millennial wave of domestic servant fiction of which Umrigar is a part explores servant interiority, agency, and vulnerability[[4]](#endnote-4) as a reaction to the rise of domestic service worldwide in the wake of post-colonial modernity and globalization. The globalized economy, as Pierette Hondagneu-Sotelo writes, has created a whole new subaltern class of peoples in the Global South, forced into menial forms of ‘unskilled’ labor in their own countries and abroad (x). Robert Young describes this reality as “almost more brutal” than the colonial societies that served as its antecedents. He writes of “those countless individuals in so many societies, who are surplus to economic requirements, redundant, remaindered, condemned to the surplasage of lives full of holes, waiting for a future that may never come.” These surplus humans have been commodified within a neo-colonial world order characterized by often ‘invisible’ global flows of capital and labor. In the Indian context, the economy was liberalized in July 1991 under heavy pressure from international lending agencies such as the International Monetary Fund. Economists colluded with elite bourgeois groups and large Western corporations to offer liberalization as a panacea for all of India’s ills. However, as subsequent critics have pointed out, liberalization has not reduced poverty. Rather, as the economist Amiya Bagchi notes in his description of “corporate feudalism,” internal collaborators of neoliberalism often pressured their own governments to hand out outrageously high profits to transnational corporations on the false argument that only these has the resources and the technology to build up the needed infrastructure such as power or water supply or highways (4). Pranab Bardhan in turn highlights the devastation caused to fragile economies by billions of dollars of volatile short-term capital stampeding around the globe in herd-like movements (2). Both economists have stressed the damage caused to jobs, wages and incomes of the poor by the dislocations and competition of international trade and foreign investment. Both have also noted the state’s unwillingness and inability to compensate for this damage and to invest in the public sector so as to alleviate poverty and inequality.

*The Space Between Us*, along with many of the texts listed above, can be read as a reaction to these economic circumstances. For one, these texts were published in the 2000s and not the 1990s when economic liberalization was only just picking up steam in the Global South, accompanied by promises of equality under the collapse of communism. The 1990s not only saw India’s entry into the global economy, but also South Africa’s first democratic government veer into free market capitalism, despite years of socialist promises. Only when widening inequalities had led to greater social divisions than had even existed under colonialism, did the conflation of free market capitalism with universal freedom begin to be revealed as hollow.[[5]](#endnote-5) In its registering of the visibility or invisibility of the domestic servant, the narratives of the 2000s, then, can be read as indexes of the extent to which the post-colonial hope of universal freedom had been dashed.

The millennial writers of which Umrigar is a part offer a stronger critique of capitalist inequality than previous postcolonial fiction and criticism, then, partly because of the period of dashed hopes in which they were writing. However, these writers also offer a strong critique because of their attention to the ways that older forms of exploitation such as colonialism are linked to newer forms such as neoliberalism because of their mutual constitution through the unfettered expansion of capitalism.[[6]](#endnote-6) In pointing to these continuities, and the way they are registered in the contemporary Anglophone novel, this essay joins eritics such as Priyamvada Gopal, Timothy Brennan and Neil Lazarus who have in different ways critiqued postcolonial studies’ theorization of imperialism in dematerialized and civilizational terms as a political encounter between the ‘East’ and ‘West’ without taking into account capitalism.[[7]](#endnote-7) While colonialism did involve the systematic annihilation of whole communities through political conquest and the hegemonic imposition of aesthetic tastes and preferences, colonialism should be understood primarily as involving the forced integration of hitherto uncapitalised or partly capitalist societies, into a capitalist world system (Warwick Research Collective, 11). Umrigar traces the effects of this colonial-capitalist past by documenting the realities of the globalized present through the figure of the domestic servant. In doing so, her text does more than just display a reforming impulse, for it is also part of a larger trend of extending the category of the postcolonial to the creation and becoming hegemonic of a capitalist world system.

As such, domestic servant narratives such as Umrigar’s are invested in registering and critiquing the workings of neo-liberal and neo-colonial capitalist ideologies. If we read *The Space Between Us* in this vein, the text emerges as both analytical and recuperative; it not only illuminates and dismantles the powerful hierarchies and modes of thinking on which neo-liberal capitalism rests, it also suggests alternative ontologies in their place. In its analytical mode, the novel is particularly apt at revealing the fictional nature of discourses about capitalism’s historically progressive nature, capturing the troubling consequences of what Marxist thinkers have labeled ‘combined and uneven development.’ As the Warwick Research Collective elaborates, this is a characterization that reveals the myth of capitalist ‘development,’ because capitalist modernity is better understood as producing and governed always by unevenness, the historically determinate ‘coexistence,’ in any given place and time, of pre-capitalist as well as capitalist formations (12). The domestic servant figure is an apt embodiment of these contradictions because she represents the coming together of neoliberal inequalities tied to ‘development’ with the sustained exacerbation of feudal and semi-feudal forms of discrimination such as caste based notions of bodily purity and pollution. Indeed, texts like Umrigar’s capture the way capitalist expansion does not eradicate but rather benefits from, and aggravates, these older cultural divisions and feudal forms of segregation. Raka Ray and Seemin Qayum flesh out some of these supposedly pre-capitalist attitudes in their identification of particular “cultures of servitude,” or “a culture in which social relations of domination/subordination, dependency and inequality are normalized and permeate both the domestic and public spheres” (3). The servant typically receives a nominal payment in exchange for labor that comes with an expectation of internalized, embodied subjugation and segregation, including previously caste driven taboos on touching, on using the same household items as one’s employers, and on bodily proximity. These cultures of segregation have endured, albeit in changed forms, from precolonial and feudal to modern times. As such, domestic servitude becomes a permanent constituent of identity that produces expectations of loyalty, deference, even self-abasement on one side, and varying degrees of obligation on the other (26).

The novel’s focus on such bodily attitudes of discrimination towards the domestic servant without a corresponding caste based storyline has led to criticism. For Toral Gajarawala, Anglophone novels such as this one are complicit in the conflation of class and caste in order to participate in a global, casteless secular modernity (Gajarawala, 150). I suggest that in the case of *The Space Between Us,* a refusal to explicitly mention caste may be quite deliberate. For it makes the point that neoliberal capitalist expansion is responsible for transforming the specificity of caste based identities and discrimination into more generalized modes of bodily subjugation that can more ubiquitously serve the needs of capital. Instead of reading the novel’s non-particularity in relation to caste as “analytical simplicity,” I see its non-specific portrayal of the bodily segregation endured by the poor domestic servant as a statement on the pervasiveness and spread of caste-*like* discrimination under neoliberalism.

Thus, rather than embodying a conflict between patriarchal feudal sources of tradition and emancipatory forms of modernity, as Geetanjali Singh Chanda argues about the novel,[[8]](#endnote-8) I suggest the converse; that *The Space Between Us* connects urban capitalist modernity to seemingly outdated and ‘traditional’ modes of segregation. And the novel makes this correlation by showing the ways that insidious pre-capitalist cultures of servitude work with the neo-liberal fiction of ‘property in the person’ to oppress the servant. The fiction of ‘property in the person,’ first illuminated by Marx, rests on the notion that a person’s capacity for work – her abilities and attributes – are her ‘property,’ which suggests that these abilities and attributes are separate from the body and alienable from the self. In the process of conceptualizing a person’s abilities as objects or commodities to be used, such an assumption objectifies and commodifies the person herself into a subordinate ‘other’ who embodies subjugation and difference in the ways dictated by pre-capitalist cultures of caste and *jati* based bodily segregation.

In addition to subjecting such capitalist fictions of ‘development’ to analytical scrutiny, the novel *recuperates* an alternative ethics of being that undermines such embodied technologies of abasement by depicting the body as a vehicle between, rather than a mode of segregating, ‘self’ and ‘other.’ In the process, the text teaches the middle class Indian reader to see herself differently – as an agent of exploitation – in a way that leads her to see the servant ‘other’ differently – as someone akin to, rather than different from, her ‘self.’ This two pronged narrative technique – destabilizing the ‘self’ in order to render the ‘other’ more familiar – is more likely to produce reader empathy towards the ‘other.’ As Suzanne Keen suggests, when we feel empathy, we feel what we believe to be the emotions of others. Empathy is thus both affective and cognitive, and distinguished from sympathy, in which feelings *for* but not *of* another occur. According to Keen, such “vicarious, spontaneous sharing of affect, can be provoked by witnessing another’s emotional state, by hearing about another’s condition, or even by reading” (Keen, 5). *The Space Between Us* fosters such an empathic state of mind by foregrounding the perspectives of the female servant through representations of Bhima’s consciousness, including inner monologues. Even as the key events of Bhima and Serabai’s lives are intimately tied to the events of the other, the narrative begins and ends with Bhima’s point of view, an act of centering that is juxtaposed with, and in turn decenters, the socially privileged voice of the employer. Such a centering not only creates reader empathy but also undermines the simplistic temporality of developmental social uplift or degradation that a linear plot would impose on the narrative. Instead, by stubbornly circling around the defining experiences of both women’s lives, the novel refuses to bypass the work of careful social reflection that can both deconstruct exploitative economic formations and recuperate forms of ethical being and action towards those that Bhima represents.

**Property in the Person, the Classed, Gendered Body of the Domestic Servant, and the Production of Readerly Empathy.**

In 1867, Karl Marx wrote one of the most important texts of the modern age, *Capital: Critique of Political Economy.* It was a groundbreaking work, critiquing capitalism by arguing that it worked primarily by exploiting commodified labor power, which was the ultimate source of surplus value and profit. Building on Marx, Carol Pateman has argued that labor power is a political fiction. For, while the employment contract seems to represent an equal exchange between a worker and his or her employer, in which money is exchanged for labor power (or the worker’s capacity for work), labor power is in fact not separable from the person of the worker like pieces of property. The worker’s capacities are developed over time and they form an integral part of her self and self-identity, constituting her will, understanding, and experience. This means that a person does not stand in the same relation to the property in her own person as she does to other types of property, because labor power is integral to personhood.[[9]](#endnote-9) Since labor power is not something that can be separated from the body, viewing it and using it as a commodity disguises the fact that the worker’s entire being is used in obedience of the employer. The relationship is one of subordination, while at the same time, through the device of contract and the fiction of property in the person, the parties are both misleadingly labeled as free and equal citizens. This embodied abjection enables the sustenance of the kinds of subjugation that buttress the globalized capitalist system.

Moreover, as the novel testifies, within the private sphere of the home, it is female domestic servants who endure a triple subordination at the hands of the globalized economic system – subordination as a citizen, as a woman, and as a domestic servant. As a long line of distinguished political ‘social contract’ theorists, including Locke, Rousseau, and Rawls have argued, the maintenance of the capitalist system itself, and indeed, of any modern society, requires a form of ‘social contract’ within which men give themselves up to public law, including employment contracts, in order to ensure the maintenance of the social order that allows them to live freely in the first place.[[10]](#endnote-10) However, as Carol Pateman has elaborated through her notion of the ‘sexual contract,’ this sacrifice of the self to public law involves the male’s retention of the right to rule the home in private. This means that both the public and private spheres depend on a sexual division of labor in which women are subordinated to men.[[11]](#endnote-11) When paid domestic labor is introduced into this equation, women/wives take responsibility as employers of the servant within the private sphere. This arrangement renders the domestic worker triply subjugated – by the terms of the social contract that render all citizens subject to public employment laws, by the men who rule their female dependents and children within the private sphere, and by the female employers of domestic servants who rule the private sphere by proxy while their men work in the public sphere.

*The Space Between Us* is remarkable for its careful capturing of the tensions between the body as personhood and the body as property embodied in the figure of the female domestic servant. It is also exemplary in its exploration of what these tensions mean for the relationship between the employer and servant, illuminating the systemic material and cultural power structures, including economic and gender relations, which produce their behaviors. In particular, the novel consistently reveals the ways that the fiction of ‘property in the person’ underpins the subordination and exploitation of Bhima by showing how Serabai conceptualizes Bhima’s abilities and attributes as commodities to be used while being unaware of the ways that this translates into commodifying and objectifying Bhima herself:

Bhima is in the kitchen, washing the dishes from last night’s dinner. Viraf wanders in, adjusting his tie. “That’s it,” he says to no one in particular. “Next month, I’m buying a dishwasher. No point in poor Bhima slogging like this.” Bhima looks up in gratitude, but before she can say a word, Sera speaks up “My Bhima can put your fancy dishwashers to shame. Not even a foreign-made machine can leave dishes as clean as Bhima can. Save your money.” …And give it to me instead, Bhima thinks to herself... she needs a few seconds to fume. Sometimes she can’t figure Serabai out. On the one hand, it makes her flush with pride when Serabai calls her “my Bhima” and talks about her proprietarily. On the other hand, she always seems to be doing things that undercut Bhima’s interests. Like refusing Viraf baba’s offer to buy a dishwasher. How nice it would be not to run her arthritic hands in water all day long. Bending over the sink to scrub the dishes has also begun to hurt her back, so that, at the end of the day, it sometimes takes half the walk home before she can straighten up.” (25)

This passage reveals the idea of property in the person as a fiction, for Bhima’s ability to wash dishes is clearly not simply a service she can rent out independently of her self. The references to Bhima’s arthritic hands and hurting back call attention to the ways that Bhima’s labor affects her whole person, so that her entire body is left marked – bent with arthritis - by her servitude. The co-option of Bhima’s entire person by Sera’s employment turns Bhima herself into a dish washing machine appreciated only in terms of her capacity to perform household tasks such as washing dishes. The washing machine, then, becomes a metaphor for the commodification and objectification of Bhima.

The passage reveals the disguised exploitation of Bhima, and produces reader empathy not just through its content but its form, successfully *integrating* several streams of information which juxtapose different subjectivities – the point of view of the female employer, that of her female servant, as well as the men and women related to the two, all while privileging Bhima’s. This textual strategy enables the novel to successfully illuminate the triple subordination inflicted on Bhima’s person. Each of the three subjects in the passage function as symbolic representations of the hierarchies that oppress Bhima. Viraf is the male patriarch of the social contract, heading the private sphere even as he is subject to the laws of the public sphere; his mother in law Serabai runs the home on his behalf as part of the sexual contract, and both together wield authority over the domestic servant, Bhima. The insidiousness of this arrangement is masked by their seemingly generous, familial banter on Bhima’s behalf. As the patriarch, Viraf offers to buy a washing machine, thereby effectively signposting Bhima’s labor as a replaceable commodity even as such a gesture is masked by his seeming concern for Bhima’s frail working body; as the matriarch, Serabai refuses the offer and seems to protect Bhima and her position as laborer by boasting about the quality of Bhima’s labor, even while this ignores Bhima’s own frailties and fatigue. The third person narrative represents these viewpoints only to center Bhima’s own perspective by making it the only one expressed through her own consciousness and interiority. As a result it becomes clear that Serabai’s structural position as an employer overdetermines her relationship with Bhima, so that her affection for her servant is negated by Sera’s position as an employer who needs to extract as much labor as she can from Bhima’s person. In ending the episode through a rhetorical question issuing from Bhima’s consciousness and aimed at the middle class literate reader, the latter is made subtly aware of these conflicting positions, as well as which point of view should be empathized with. Indeed, instead of the servant figure serving as the foil to the employer, as Bruce Robbins points out about much Victorian fiction, Serabai’s characterization functions as a vehicle through which Bhima’s interiority is fleshed out, lifting the servant figure beyond mere stereotype into someone who it is possible to identify and empathize with.

The novel continues to reveal how the invisible terms of the employment contract result in the commodification of characters. After Bhima’s husband, Gopal, is fired and cheated out of a compensation package following an accident at work, he despondently notes that

“One way or the other, they would’ve tricked us. Because they own the world, you see. They have the machines and the money and the factories and the education. We are just the tools they use to get all those things. You know how I use a hammer to pound in a nail? Well, they use me like a hammer to get what they want. That’s all I am to them, a hammer. And what happens to a hammer once its teeth break off? You throw it away and get a new hammer.” (317).

The characterization of Bhima as a washing machine and Gopal as a hammer suggests that the logical corollary of the fiction of property in the person - which treats an individual’s labor as something alienable - if carried to its extreme conclusion, translates into the person themselves being reduced to an alienable object. Gopal, like the hammer, is regarded by his employers as the sum total of his labor power, just a commodity to be used and then thrown away. He operates as a means to an end rather than an end in himself.

Yet the text also continually shows how human subjectivity resists such commodification; the laboring self is inherently more than just an object to be bought and sold because she is inextricably connected to both the objects that her labor produces and to other human beings through bonds that exceed the logic of the market. This is apparent in a passage that dwells on Bhima’s relationship to her working environment:

“She looks around at the kitchen, every inch of which she has swept and cleaned so many times. So many evenings she has entered this room without bothering to turn on the lights and still she has known where to find every fork, every dish, every pan. She takes in the cobweb that is forming in the corner near the window—she had meant to clean that web off yesterday. She feels a second’s pride as she notices the shine on the pressure cooker, which she washed earlier today.”

Here, Bhima’s laboring self is not alienable in the way that the unspoken rules of the employment contract suggest; she cannot separate her labor from herself and place it as a discrete, bounded entity at the disposal of her employers. For the spaces in which Bhima works, and the objects she works on, are not only transformed and imprinted by her labor but imprint her in turn. Bhima’s whole hearted, careful work in the kitchen is performed in the spirit of one who has a stake in the result that exceeds the terms of exchange of labor presumed by the employer. It is Bhima and not Serabai who feels the pride of ownership as she observes the kitchen’s gleam. Yet the passage also reveals the misplaced nature of her emotions in this context; her humanity is impermissible here. Bhima caring for her employer and feeling pride in her work are pointless and run counter to her own interests, for to Serabai she primarily represents a labor performing machine.

Once again, the novel’s narration of this content does not operate independently of textual form. The passage produces empathy for Bhima by shifting its focus to a representation of Bhima’s consciousness and carefully delineating the emotions she feels as she surveys the kitchen. The thread of emotional states that produce Bhima as a human being, complete with a personality and emotions, effectively undermine the notion that she is in fact just a laboring machine, undoing the alienation and exploitation of the labor contract through its very form. As Keen writes, character identification often invites empathy, even when the fictional character and reader differ from one another in all sorts of practical and obvious ways (x). In this passage, the reader is made to identify with Bhima’s perspective by viewing the kitchen through her eyes as she shifts her gaze from item to item. The narrative lingers on her feelings for each item so that Bhima’s emotional connection to these objects, as well as the experience of working on that object, is also transferred to the reader. The corollary is that her anger towards Serabai at the passage’s end, as she reminds herself how “these people discarded you like an old, stale slice of bread,” is also transferred to the middle class reader.

The implied metaphor of Bhima as Serabai’s “discarded” leftovers captures the dehumanizing dynamic of the employment contract and the inequality of the relationship between Serabai and Bhima; Serabai ‘consumes’ Bhima’s labor power while refusing to give of her self in return. Serabai’s self is continually bounded against Bhima, who is essentialized as the absolute other in order to shore up Sera’s own middle class identity, despite the commonalities in the two women’s emotional states. Both have undergone profound personal loss and weathered various forms of domestic oppression while being privy to each other’s most personal experiences. Yet this familiarity does not breed intimacy; at the end of the novel, Bhima wonders how Serabai will handle the news that her admired son-in-law is actually an adulterous rapist. In that moment, the narrator simply reminds us that Bhima will never know how Serabai will process this realization; she does not have access to Serabai’s consciousness, only to the labor her employer consumes “through her actions and routines. She knows that her mistress likes her tea light and milky, that she doesn’t like starch on her laundered clothes, that she is generous, and that she believes in the value of education. But after all these years of working in Serabai’s home, Bhima has no idea what she thinks” (436). Domestic worker and employer are both so embroiled within and produced by their class roles and the fiction of property in the person that their humanity is forced into abeyance, their relationships with each other unnaturally curtailed.

The text once again represents this uneven dynamic between employer and servant through its narrative form. Serabai’s own perspective about her son-in-law’s possible action is obscured by the structure of the passage. We are presented with the question of Serabai’s internal reaction to Bhima’s horrendous revelation about Viraf only through Bhima’s own wonderings about Sera’s point of view. Sera’s interiority thus appears twice removed and finally foreclosed to the reader. While on one hand this formal device orchestrates Bhima’s realization that Sera’s own state of mind will never be accessible to someone like her, it simultaneously also suggests that Sera’s point of view is not as important as the objective truth of Viraf’s treachery. Significantly, while in much postcolonial theory representing the subaltern other remains an act of hegemony, the text’s simultaneous act of othering the employer’s familiar ‘self’ undoes the potential hegemony of such a representation. It is Sera and not the subaltern Bhima who cannot speak; Sera’s speech and subjectivity in this instance is rendered irrelevant and therefore illegible in the face of the careful parsing and illumination of the ideological and material structures that subjugate Bhima, and in which Sera is complicit.[[12]](#endnote-12)

Yet even as the content and form of the novel valorizes Bhima’s “obvious truth” about Viraf’s crime against Maya over his “obvious lie,” the social world in which the novel is set completely disregards it. For within this world, it seems to be a greater ‘truth’ that under the unacknowledged assumptions of the labor contract the servant will cede aspects of herself to her employer that go beyond her labor power, including the indiscriminate use of her body. Such an assumption of bodily ownership is most chillingly revealed in the sexual encounter between Maya and Viraf. The incident takes place following Viraf’s request that Maya perform what should have been a simple labor chore upon his person, a massage, in just the way that the male “massagewallas at Chowpatty Beach” do. Umrigar is careful to highlight this act as a labor chore to Maya: “Her fingers found the knot of muscle and worked deftly to untie it. “Dig deeper,” Viraf grunted. He turned slightly on his side and undid a couple more buttons to give her more room to work.” Maya is doing her job here, an interpretation supported by the narrative voice’s own labeling of the act as “work.” Yet Viraf takes for granted that Maya is entirely available to service him, sexually and otherwise. The assumption that underlies the fiction of property in the person – that the labor performed by the body is alienable - translates into the entire self being thought of as alienable, which is why Viraf is able to use Maya’s body in a way that constitutes a breach of her selfhood. Maya becomes nothing but labor power to Viraf, providing the satisfying of a bodily function, from the untying of the knot in his neck to sexual release at a time when his wife Dinaz is refusing to sleep with him: “Maya came to her senses before he did. While she lay frozen, rigid with terror and shame, he was still glowing, still limp with warmth and release. ‘Been so long…,’ she half-heard him say. ‘Dinaz’s pregnancy…so frigid…won’t let me near her…’ But she could barely hear what he was saying above the clanging bells of her own fear.” Viraf’s use of Maya as a commodity that satisfies a need, in the same way that Bhima is a dish washing machine, and Gopal a hammer, is apparent in his final words to her: “He was out the door when he turned back. ‘Oh, one more thing,’ Viraf said. ‘Don’t forget to wash the sheets, okay?’” (390-396). The careless nonchalance with which he throws this command her way testifies to Viraf’s reduction of Maya to an embodiment of waged labor, whether a massage, sleeping with the boss, or washing incriminating evidence of the rape off the sheets. Yet the narrative form consistently undermines this social understanding and invites empathy for Maya by privileging her own feelings at this moment. Viraf’s sexual frustration is literally a background noise; what is foregrounded to the reader are the “clanging bells of her own fear,” calling the reader to attention that what has happened is a rape. And, when Viraf leaves Maya, rather than walking out with him, the reader is left behind with Maya’s crouched injured and fearful body, looking on at her “hurt, cowering look,” and sharing the prospect of washing her virginal blood off her employer’s sheets.

The sheet that can be washed to erase any evidence of wrongdoing is symbolic of the crime against Maya’s person, which can easily be washed away within the world of systemic inequality she inhabits. Viraf rapes Maya with impunity and never has to pay for his crime because it is taken for granted that he has already paid under the assumption that Maya’s entire self is up for sale along with her labor. The washable sheet signals the way that property in the person is a fiction that continually whitewashes what is actually at stake in the work of a domestic servant – the commodification and objectification of the person’s entire self. But the metaphor also testifies to the porosity of the fiction, for it needs to be continually ‘washed clean’ of violence in order to uphold the projected and questionable ‘truth’ of the freedom and equality of the employment contract.

**Cultivating Distinction through the Fiction of Property in the Person**

Because the fiction of ‘property in the person’ is as precarious as stains on washable sheets, it must be constantly maintained through the “cultures of servitude” that cultivate distinction between employer and servant. As Anderson suggests (20), and as Ray and Qayyum confirm, the cultivation of distinction is a foundational premise of a culture of servitude (26), aided by persisting feudal notions of untouchability. The servant’s difference needs to be continually reinforced through a performed superiority on the part of the employer. In other words, class is in no way a stable identity from which various acts proceed; rather, it is an identity partly constituted through the bodily stylization of the employing self as socially superior.

*The Space Between Us* continually testifies to this theorization of class as a performative identity through Sera’s middle class community, which partakes in a repeated cultivation of distinction founded on the premise that servants are an inherently distinct and inferior species from employers. As Aban, one of Serabai’s best friends puts it: “these ghatis are ghatis” (236). The word “ghati” is Hindi slang used to denote an uncultured and ignorant person. While the reader may be tempted to agree with this designation, the text’s use of a rhetorical tautology to voice Aban’s prejudice undermines any such inclination. A tautology is a ‘logical’ argument constructed by repeating the same assertion in such a way that the proposition *as stated* is logically irrefutable, even as it obscures the lack of evidence or valid reasoning to support its judgment. Umrigar’s use of tautology here is deliberate, for it testifies to the desperate necessity of classifying servants as an absolute ‘other’ through animal similes and metaphors, thereby upholding inherently unstable notions of superiority: “They are like snakes, these people. They can see in the dark, I think” (236) and “This is what happens when you try turning a stray dog into a family pet. Sooner or later, that dog is going to bite you” (427). Class is reinforced through a series of culturally constructed assumptions about the inferior ‘other,’ even while it figures servant identity as somehow a pre-discursive unquestionable reality. The inferiority of servants is repeatedly performed and embodied on the part of both employer and employed.

Even Serabai reverts to this belief system in times of emotional pressure, immediately blaming Bhima’s incensed accusations that Viraf raped Maya on Bhima’s social status. “‘Bhima,’ Sera hisses, her face white with fury. ‘Control yourself. Have you gone mad, talking in this low-class way? Don’t forget who you’re talking to’” (427). Yet, the novel undoes such a belief system by revealing “low-class” status not as a biological fact that must inevitably reveal itself at times of emotional pressure, but as a construction through which the employer acquires her own sense of self. As Bridget Anderson points out, the employer reproduces her own status (middle class, non laborer, clean) in contrast to her domestic servant’s (worker, degraded, dirty). The employment of a paid domestic worker facilitates status reproduction not only by maintaining status objects, enabling the silver to be polished or the clothes to be ironed, but also by serving as a foil to the lady of the house. Thus, domestic work is not definable in terms of tasks but in terms of a role which constructs and situates the worker within a set of physical, cultural and ideological social relationships (19). When the middle class reader finds herself responding with familiarity and disgust to Serabai’s actions, she is forced to face the idea that what she considers as innate to her own subjectivity is in fact socially produced through the repression of all that which is considered ‘low class’ or ‘servant-like.’

In *The Space Between Us,* the stylized production of class superiority on the part of the employer involves a corresponding embodied subjugation on the part of the domestic worker. For the duration of employment, the domestic worker’s entire body is made to embody subjugation by sitting, standing and being according to the whims of the employer. The bodily cultivation of distinction between servants and employers takes the form of spatial segregation, through a theorization of the servant body as a site of pollution that needs to be bounded against the bodily space of the employer. Maintaining class distinction is about preserving the physical distance between employers and servants, segregating the latter through the politics and practices of eating, sitting, sleeping, bathing, and clothing. The physical “space between us,” in other words, translates directly into maintaining the metaphorical space of class position, an imperative that explains why even when Bhima is perilously ill, Serabai leaves her to recuperate in the open air of the balcony rather than giving her one of the spare beds. Indeed, “the thought of her sleeping on one of their beds had been too repulsive to Sera… when it was time to give Bhima her pills, Sera made sure that she plopped them in Bhima’s open palm without making contact” (160). The novel calls attention to this kind of spatial distinction as an insidious form of caste like discrimination by depicting it as a memory of inhumane treatment that tugs at Sera’s conscience.

If the ground of class identity is the stylized repetition of acts through time, such an identity can easily be threatened through what Judith Butler, in the case of gender, suggests is a different sort of repeating, in the breaking or subversive repetition of that style (520). The idea that the servant may refuse to play the part of a subordinate explains the employer’s constant fear of the servant, for the servant has the power to overturn performed class identities of her employer if she simply refuses to play her part. A number of characters seem well aware of the precarity of their superior social position. Serabai’s husband says: “Servants have to be kept in their place…you can’t treat these people too well. Best to keep them at some distance. Otherwise they will take advantage of you, hundred percent guaranteed” (237). Echoing these beliefs, Serabai displays an ambivalent response to Dinaz’s disruption of her mother’s stylized cultivation of distinction:

Serabai had tensed the day she caught her daughter giving Bhima an affectionate hug. Watching that hug, Sera had been seared by conflicting emotions—pride and awe at the casual ease with which Dinaz had broken an unspoken taboo, but also a feeling of revulsion, so that she had had to suppress the urge to order her daughter to go wash her hands. Which is surprising… she herself had on numerous occasions declared that Bhima was one of the cleanest people she knew (37).

There is no substantive reason why Dinaz should not hug Bhima as Serabai herself points out. Rather, the horror is a response to what the hug represents – a threat to Sera’s own performed superiority. Serabai’s definition of herself in relation to Bhima is so powerful that it produces a body that is physically “repulsed” by proximity to the servant, and must be cordoned off against the ‘other.’ Such a bodily disciplining is symbolized by the washing of hands. Yet, the passage also testifies to the way that Serabai is more complex than such an analysis of irrational prejudice would suggest. She is also the modern subject of human rights discourse, well versed in the mechanics of historical oppressions and the corresponding struggles for equality between humans. This explains why Sera is “seared by conflicting emotions—pride and awe at the casual ease with which Dinaz had broken an unspoken taboo.”

Just as in this passage, the narrative repeatedly and deliberately presents Sera as a split-subjectivity, capable of the utmost kindness and compassion towards Bhima even as she maintains underlying prejudices about Bhima’s innate difference. This characterization may be a deliberate textual strategy on Umrigar’s part, for it enables the middle class reader to more easily identify with Serabai and reflect on their own attitudes than if she was presented as an extreme. In order to make this kind of readerly identification with and ultimate repudiation of Serabai even more pronounced, the text draws parallels between the treatment of Bhima and Serabai’s own sufferings as a newly wed bride who was forced to abide by her mother-in-law's rule that a menstruating woman be quarantined, using separate utensils and eating meals alone in her bedroom. Such a juxtaposition of Bhima’s suffering at Serabai’s hands, and Serabai’s at her mother in laws’, draws parallels between different situations to make a point about the unfairness of the way that Bhima is treated.

“Sera felt that she was up against something insidious; that Banu [her mother in law] was assaulting both her body and her mind. So this is evil, she thought to herself. Before, she had always imagined that evil played out on a large canvas—wars, concentration camps, gas chambers, the partitioning of nations. Now, she realized that evil had a domestic side, and its very banality protected it from exposure. A quick look at Gulab’s impassive face told her the servant had long ago learned what she was just learning” (111).

The reader first recognizes and possibly identifies with the pain of Serabai’s patriarchal mistreatment, and is then forced to transfer that perspectival lens to the servant figure Gulab, Bhima’s symbolic proxy, who witnesses Sera’s humiliation and abuse. Through the passage’s triad of matriarch, daughter-in-law, and female servant, the text’s uncomfortable parallels also illuminate the ways in which the sexual contract that punishes wives is bound up with the employment contract in a way that takes a heavy toll on the domestic servant. Patriarchal discrimination against wives takes the same forms as those that the wife then directs against the domestic servant, reducing a fellow human being into not much more than a site of pollution. Umrigar’s comparison of the treatment of the wife with that of the servant even as she points out the created class opposition between the two is also a vehicle towards eliciting the reader’s empathy towards the servant, for it negates the understanding of the ‘other’ as one different from the self.

**Embodying Empathy and Narrowing “the Space Between Us”**

Various theorists have contested the literary impulse towards creating and experiencing narrative empathy,[[13]](#endnote-13) with some in particular arguing that the production of narrative empathy is closely tied to the questionable notion of universal human emotions, a construct that supposedly impedes political engagement rather than aiding it.[[14]](#endnote-14) Yet, a number of writers including Umrigar have demonstrated the liberating potential of evoking what Susanne Keen has called ‘broadcast strategic empathy,’ calling upon the reader to feel with members of a group by emphasizing common vulnerabilities and hopes through universalizing representations (xiv). Many of the above mentioned post-colonial novels that take the domestic servant as their central figure partake in such a project, extending the readers’ sense of a shared humanity.

In response to domestic regimes of discrimination, *The Space Between Us* also posits a universalizing humanity to evoke empathy. The text does so by theorizing a body that is not just an embodiment of commodified labor, or an emblem of difference produced through spatial regimes of distinction that segregate a material body. Instead, the body is constituted by an affective materiality. The term ‘affect’ is most often used interchangeably with passion, sentiment, mood, feeling, or emotion but, as Brian Massumi and Theresa Brennan have specified, it also refers to a body’s capacity to affect and be affected, its perpetual transitions, its always becoming otherwise through different forces of encounter to do with its own corporeality, the other bodies it comes into contact with, and its environment. In other words, this is a body defined by its emotional interactions with its environment and other people.[[15]](#endnote-15)

Such a conception of the body’s materiality as constituted through its unboundedness in relation to others is perhaps most powerfully articulated by Serabai after a particularly bad beating from her husband:

“perhaps the body is this hypersensitive, revengeful entity, a ledger book, a warehouse of remembered slights and cruelties. But if this is true, surely the body also remembers each kindness, each kiss, each act of compassion? Surely this is our salvation, our only hope—that joy and love are also woven into the fabric of the body, into each sinewy muscle, into the core of each pulsating cell” (144)?

This idea of the body as an affective repository of one’s intersubjective relationships with other human beings is a radical one because within this ontology Bhima’s body has just as much value, if not more, than anyone else’s. Indeed, through her selfless touch, Bhima serves as the healing masseuse of Serabai’s body, skillfully rubbing out Sera’s wounds through her hands. But significantly, such miraculous healing power is only possible through Bhima’s transgression of the boundaries between classes, by her crossing the “space between us”: “Sera recoiled. Bhima had never touched her before. She tried to muster some resistance but found that she couldn’t come up with one good reason for why Bhima’s hands should not touch her.” Sera succumbs to Bhima’s touch because affectively it exceeds cultural and class based impositions of meaning. Bhima’s touch amounts to the power of “friendliness and caring … [nothing] felt as generous, as selfless, as this massage did…“Poor Serabai,” Bhima was murmuring. “So many burdens this poor body is carrying. So much unhappiness. Give it up to the devil, give it up, don’t carry this around.” (150). The truth of this touch is what forces Serabai to look upon Bhima as “another human being” instead of just a servant. Indeed, Bhima’s selfless caring and redemptive healing far surpasses what is required of her as Serabai’s servant and is responsible for Serabai’s “life beginning to stir in her veins.” The moment is so significant that the narrative voice describes it as a kind of rebirth, with “old hurts and fresh wounds being exorcised from her body, leaving her feeling as bright and new as the day she was born” (151). Symbolically, this affective rebirth suggests that Bhima emerges as Sera’s mother, a role reversal that testifies to the power of the body’s capacity to relate to others in a way that can erase the “space between us.” By ‘birthing’ Sera from her own body, Bhima makes room for the transgressive experience of touch, undoing an ontology based on discrimination and bodily segregation. As her symbolic mother, Bhima contains Sera’s body within her, allowing the ‘other’ to occupy the ‘self’ in a way that negates the ‘self’- ‘other’ distinction. The touch of the untouchable other becomes the vehicle through which the self can truly recover itself.

The liberating or insidious touches of another human being serve as framing counterpoints in the novel, through Bhima’s massage and through another very different massage - that which Maya performs on Viraf. One metaphorically gives birth to a new life, while the other, in resulting in the conception and abortion of Maya and Viraf’s child, causes a new life to be ended. Both massages encapsulate two opposing worldviews and bodily ontologies; one marked by greed, conquest, and the satisfaction of personal needs, and the other by generosity and selflessness. Together, these intertwined narrative threads suggest that human beings acquire their materiality and value only through their non-commodifiable relationships with other beings, and that this requires the conceptualization of bodies as affectively interconnected ends in themselves. Such an understanding of the body as constituted through its relationships with other bodies is, then, a refusal of the discriminatory regimes of segregation that underpin capitalist exploitation. As an embodiment of the suffering inflicted by these regimes, the domestic servant serves as a particularly strong critique of India’s rushing capitalist expansion under neoliberalism, and its resulting processes of combined and uneven development.

I will end with one of the novel’s most searing passages, which encapsulates India’s relentless runaway plunge into neo-liberal capitalism through the symbolic journey of a roughly and carelessly driven bus. Bhima sees the

“red beast arrive in a cloud of smog. She could feel her heart pounding as she eyed her fellow passengers, trying to assess who looked weak and vulnerable, and who could be elbowed out of her way. As soon as the bus rolled in, the queue disintegrated into a mob. Others came running from all directions, trying to leap onto the platform of the bus before it even came to a stop. Once, an old man with one foot on the deck and the other still on the ground was dragged half a block by the moving bus, until the cries of the other passengers alerted the conductor to stop. Bhima noticed the man’s legs were shaking so hard that it was impossible for him to board. The conductor eyed the man impatiently from his imperial perch. “Coming or not?” he asked, but the poor old man merely stood there panting. The bus rolled on, leaving the passenger in the middle of the road, discarded like a package with no address on it” (125).

The passage encapsulates the work of the novel as a whole, for it captures the disintegration of the public sphere into one where power and money reign supreme. In this Darwinian landscape only the fittest survive, with the “weak and vulnerable” systematically identified for exploitation. Yet this state of affairs is not attributable to the ‘natural’ state of man, for the scarcity of resources that results in “people leaping on to the bus before it even came to a stop” is man made. This lack is socially engineered; in this extended metaphor for the journey India has taken, the conductor represents the “imperial” power of the capitalist world system, responsible for steering the country into a particular direction regardless of the consequences, and in complete disregard of the human collateral. Moreover, this power is not colonial but neo-colonial; for it is the result of a new transnational system of brutality that divides humans globally into two categories: the ruling and the ruled, the rich and the poor, the strong and the weak. And the catch 22 is that Bhima has no choice but to get on the bus, for she has to work as a domestic servant in order to survive, even as she knows that the bus journey is life threatening. The novel captures the workings of a system of global power and privilege that thrives on homogenizing the globe into a marketplace, putting a price tag on everyone until they are evaluated through singular metrics. If they do not measure up, they are simply “discarded like a package with no address on it.” Umrigar’s representative yet unique text deals with the lives of the domestic servants who work at elite addresses without having permanent addressesof their own and are most likely to be discarded when their labour power is exhausted. In response, the novel points to the need for a hermeneutic that registers global capital as the new colonialism, unifying and homogenizing social experience all over the world, ironically by exaggerating those cultural traditions and world views that create difference and cultivate distinction. In the process, the literary movement of millennial domestic servant fiction makes room for new non-capitalist ontologies of the self and other that re-‘address’ the suffering of those who remain temporally and geographically stranded where they can only wait “for a future that may never come” (Young, 27).

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1. I use the categorization ‘post-colonial Anglophone’ to refer to works written in English after the collapse of European colonialism that are set in the Global South. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Not all of these texts participate in the mode of social realism in their use of the servant as an embodiment of the ill effects of capitalist expansion. For intance, while *The White Tiger* does center the figure of the domestic servant just as *The Space Between Us* does, Toral Gajarawala notes that the novel abandons realism in favor of a detrimental individualistic modernism that obscures rather than illuminates the social totality. Toral Gajarawala, *Untouchable Fictions: Literary Realism and the Crisis of Caste* (Fordham: Fordham University Press, 2012), 147-150. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Take for instance the character of Ayah in Bapsi Sidhwa’s *Cracking India* where Ayah personifies the victimization of the nation undergoing the throes of partition and independence. Take also the servant figure in Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children,* where Padma serves as a plot enabler, a foil to the upper middle class protagonist, and a narrative device through which the story of India’s independence can be told. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. ### Writing about Victorian fiction, Bruce Robbins has noted both “the exclusion of servants from literary representation” (ix) and the more surprising literary “effects” of the “power” of their invisible presence (ix, xi). See Bruce Robbins, *The Servant’s Hand: English Fiction from Below* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993). In this fiction, as Ambreen Hai points out, servants perform a variety of aesthetic or *narratival* purposes which include signifying the protagonist’s socio-economic status and class privilege, enabling the plot, bearing witness, or providing missing information, telling the master’s story, or serving as local color or setting. Ambreen Hai, “Postcolonial Servitude: Interiority and System in Daniyal Mueenuddin’s *In Other Rooms, Other Wonders” Ariel: A Review of International English Literature* 45.3 (2014).

   [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. The government’s own statistics agency concludes that average black ‘African’ household income declined 19 percent from 1995 to 2000, while white income was up 15 percent.” Ashwin Desai and Richard Pithouse, “What stank in the past is the present's perfume”: Dispossession, Resistance, and Repression in Mandela Park” *South Atlantic Quarterly* Fall 2004 103(4), 843. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Indeed, it is reasonable to argue that dominant strains of postcolonial criticism have been replaced with other questionable disciplinary formations such as the Global Anglophone or World Literature primarily because of postcolonial studies’ inability to conduct a systemic critique of colonial and post-colonial modernity as similarly constituted through the predatory expansion of capital. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. See Priyamvada Gopal, *Literary Radicalism in India: Gender, Nation and the Transition to Independence.* London: Routledge, 2005., 8, Neil Lazarus, “What Postcolonial Theory doesn’t Say.” *Race Class (*2011) 53:3, and Timothy Brennan, “Postcolonial Studies and Globalization Theory” in Neil Lazarus (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Postcolonial Literary Studies.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004: 120-138. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Chanda argues that within the domestic space, women’s marginal status enables them to participate in modernity by ignoring class distinctions with each other; however, in relation to dominant patriarchal structures, they conform to traditional class and gender divisions in order to survive. This is a questionable and overly optmistic reading if we take into account my interpretation of the novel as pointing to the ways that capitalist modernity involves an exacerbation of, rather than an alleviation of ‘traditional’ structures of division. See Geetanjali Singh Chanda. "'Womenspace': Negotiating Class And Gender In Indian English Novels." *Emerging South Asian Women Writers: Essays and Interviews.* 117-133. New York, NY: Peter Lang, 2016. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Carol Pateman, *The Sexual Contract,* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1988): 150-151. The lack of consensus over who owned the labor of a servant uncovers the complexities of the debate. The employer clearly owned the objects produced by his servant’s labor, such as the dinner cooked, but what about the labor-power itself? Did a servant own her own labor-power, or did the master who hired the servant take ownership? Locke suggested that the employer owned the labor-power of the servant: “the grass my horse has bit, the turfs my servant has cut…become my property…the labor that was mine removing them out of the common state they were in, has fixed my property in them.” Another contemporary writer, John Vancouver, claimed that the ownership of labor-power could not be transferred. For Vancouver, individual talent of labor or ingenuity was their untransferable stock of productive labor, whether of a corporeal or mental quality.” See John Vancouver, *An Enquiry into the Causes and Production of Poverty, and the State of the Poor* (London: 1796), 4-6. Employers seem to have favored the Lockean view. See John Locke, *The Second Treatise of Civil Government* (1690), Gutenberg.org, CHAP. 5 “Of Property.” [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Social contract theories originate in stories told to explain the formation of civil society and why citizens submit voluntarily to the state. The basic story tells of how inhabitants of the state of nature, each motivated purely by self-interest, agree to a social contract whereby civil society is created and the behavior of each is regulated for the benefit of all. For instance, John Locke wrote: “if man in the state of nature be so free as has been said: if he be absolute lord of his own person and possessions, equal to the greatest and subject to nobody, why will he part with his freedom…because though in the state of nature he hath such a right, yet the enjoyment of it is very uncertain, thus social contract for mutual preservation of lives, liberties and estates…” See John Locke, *The Second Treatise of Civil Government* (1690), Gutenberg.org, CHAP. IX, “Of the Ends of Political Society and Government,” Section 123. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Carol Pateman, *The Sexual Contract*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1988 [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. See Spivak’s important essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?,” which critiques European intellectuals (Foucault and Deleuze) and positivist social scientists (historians, anthropologists) who assume they can act as transparent transmitters of the consciousnesses of those lost in official records or dominant discourses. While Spivak attacks these intellectuals’ act of representing or speaking for the subaltern, she does not dismiss the general imaginative act of re-presenting subaltern lives in art. Umrigar’s novel does precisely this work of subaltern representation in a way that, at key moments of the text, obscures Sera’s subjectivity in favor of Bhima’s. Gayatri Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader*. Ed. Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman. New York: Columbia UP, 1994. 66–111. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Critics have argued that narrative empathy makes it less likely for the reader to respond to social injustice with political engagement, that narrative empathy is a pornographic enjoyment of sensation at the expense of others, and that it is a weak form of appeal in response to organized hatred. See Richard Posner “Against Ethical Criticism.” *Philosophy and Literature* 21 (1997): 1–27, Marcus Wood, *Slavery, Empathy and Pornography.* Oxford and New York: Oxford, 2002. and Philip Gourevitch, *We Wish to Inform You That Tomorrow we will be Killed with our Families: Stories from Rwanda*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1998. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. For a critique of the idea that the notion of universal human emotions is inherently hegemonic, see Stanley Cohen, *States of Denial: Knowing about Atrocities and Suffering.* Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001. 279-301. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. See Brian Massumi, “Notes on the Translation and Acknowledgements.” In Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, A Thousand Plateaus. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1981, xvi: “AFFECT/AFFECTION. Neither word denotes a personal feeling (sentiment in Deleuze and Guattai). *L’affect* (Spinoza’s *affectus*) is an ability to affect and be affected. It is a prepersonal intensity corresponding to the passage from one experiential state of the body to another and implying an augmentation or diminution in that body’s capacity to act. *L’affection* (Spinoza’s *affection*) is each such state considered as an encounter between the affected body and a second, affecting, body.” See also Theresa Brennan, The Transmission of Affect. Ithaca: Cornell U. P., 2004. Brennan writes: “The transmission of affect means that we are not self-contained in terms of our energies. There is no secure distinction between the ‘individual’ and the ‘environment.’” [↑](#endnote-ref-15)