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

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Abstract: This article focuses on diasporic Indian writer Thrity Umrigar's *The Space Between Us* (2005) and situates the work in the literary context of the postcolonial Anglophone novel and social realism, as well as the social context of India's liberalized economy and growing class divides. I argue that the novel represents a growing body of contemporary Anglophone writing from the Global South focusing on the figure of the domestic servant in order to problematize the cultural and economic structures that subjugate her. In concentrating on this marginalized and dispossessed individual, texts like *The Space Between Us* reveal the fictional nature of the discourses of capitalist "development" on which neo-liberal globalization is based. The novel illuminates the oppression of the domestic worker by highlighting how these modern discourses enable the sale of her entire body to her employer so that it can be directed to sit, stand, and embody subjugation and difference in culturally specific ways. I contend 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 as an agent of exploitation and the servant as someone similar to herself. Umrigar's novel also serves a wider global Anglophone readership in its attempt to destabilize capitalist modes of evaluating laborers and labor, thereby inciting ethical action in specific postcolonial contexts.

Keywords: domestic servants, subaltern representation, Thrity Umrigar, neo-liberal globalization, postcolonialism, *The Space Between Us*

In a passage at the heart of her novel *The Space Between Us* (2005), diasporic Indian writer Thrity Umrigar describes the changes wrought on the everyday lives of urban Indians as a result of economic liberalization. Set in contemporary Mumbai and written for an audience of educated Indians and non-Indians, the novel investigates increasing social divisions through the lens of an institution defined by economic inequality: domestic servitude. The story is largely told from the perspective of Bhima, the longtime housekeeper of a middle-class Parsi widow named Sera. 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 paid for Maya's education and now helps her obtain an abortion. Sera's friends tease her for treating Bhima "like she is the Kohinoor diamond" (Umrigar 170) even though Sera is careful to always maintain a social distance from her housekeeper, keeping separate utensils for Bhima to use and letting her "squat on the floor rather than use a chair" (27). When Bhima finally reveals that Maya's pregnancy was the result of a rape perpetrated 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" (311).

The Space Between Us is a social realist novel, a genre that has a global lineage ranging from Émile Zola to Leo Tolstoy and Charles Dickens, as well as Munshi Premchand and Mulk Raj Anand in India. While it varies in terms of aesthetic practices, realist narrative clings to the hope that it is possible to represent social reality in a way that enables reflection and change. Its attention to surface materiality—including the ethnographic documentation of culture—provides insights into how reality is produced by power and thereby spurs ethical actions toward altering that reality (Abbas 145–54).

Umrigar's novel is part of the long Indian tradition of the social realist novel that was inaugurated by members, including Premchand, of the Progressive Writers Association. This group, writing in the first half of the twentieth century, challenged upper-middle-class morality in order to convey ideas of gender- and caste-based uplift and reform. As Priyamvada Gopal writes, "[r]ealism, within this framework, is less an aesthetic technique than a philosophy that brings together an affec-

tive 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 perspective rather than that of her middle-class employer, *The Space Between Us* shares with these writers the goal of expanding the definition of who counts as a worthy protagonist of a novel. By privileging the servant's perspective, the narrative voice also orchestrates what Ashish Rajyadhaksha describes as "democratic realism": while "state realism" operates through a top-down disciplinary gaze, democratic realism is embedded and localized; it is an insider's view (296–317).

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 rather than attention only to whatever manifests itself on the surface of social life (Lukács 151). Indeed, *The Space Between Us* seeks to display the totality of the social whole that lies beneath the characters' thoughts and actions. It therefore attends 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 postcolonial Anglophone literatures that have begun to move the figure of the domestic servant from narrative periphery to center. As Ambreen Hai notes, such fiction includes a spate of recent titles, many of them set in South Asia and all in the Global South: Aravind Adiga's *White Tiger* (2008),[1] Romesh Gunesekera's *Reef* (1994), Joseph O'Neill's *The Dog* (2014), Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006), and Daniyal Mueenuddin's short story collection, *In Other Rooms* (2009). These texts, as Hai elaborates, differ from those of the British literary tradition, which tends to include domestic servants primarily to serve aesthetic or narrative purposes, including as foils for the protagonist, comic relief, plot enablers, witnesses, tellers of their masters' stories, and expositors (Hai 34–35).[2] The new wave of literature is also different from South Asian narratives from the 1940s through the 1980s, which cast servant figures as background for the trials faced by nations on the verge of independence or for the

emergence of a postcolonial elite.[3] Finally, domestic servant narratives written and set in the first decades of the new millennium also differentiate themselves from colonial and 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, 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 servants' interiority, agency, and vulnerability as a reaction to the worldwide rise of domestic servitude in the wake of postcolonial modernity and globalization. The globalized economy, as Pierette Hondagneu-Sotelo writes, has created a new subaltern class of peoples in the Global South who are forced into menial forms of "unskilled" labor in their own countries and abroad (x). Robert Young describes this reality as "almost more brutal" (27) 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" (27). These surplus humans have been commodified within a neo-colonial world order characterized by often invisible global flows of capital and labor. In India, the economy was liberalized in July 1991 under intense 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 critics note, liberalization has not reduced poverty. Rather, as economist Amiya Bagchi observes in his description of "corporate feudalism," domestic neo-liberal collaborators often pressured their own governments to hand out outrageously high profits to transnational corporations by forwarding the false argument that only they had the resources and technology to build needed infrastructure such as power and water supplies or highways (4). Pranab Bardhan high-

lights the devastation to fragile economies, such as India's, by billions of dollars of volatile short-term capital stampeding around the globe in herd-like movements (2). Both economists stress the damage caused to the jobs and incomes of the poor by international trade and foreign investment. They also note the Indian 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. Umrigar's novel and the works of her contemporaries were published in the 2000s rather than the 1990s, when economic liberalization was just beginning to pick up steam in the Global South, accompanied by the claim that capitalism was the surest route to social equality. In addition to India's entry into the global economy, the 1990s also saw South Africa's first democratic government veer into free market capitalism despite years of socialist promises. The conflation of free market capitalism with universal freedom was only revealed as hollow when widening inequalities led to greater social disparities than had existed under colonialism.[4] Thus, in registering both the visibility and invisibility of the domestic servant, the narratives of the 2000s can be read as indices of the extent to which the postcolonial hope of universal freedom was dashed.

Millennial writers, including Umrigar, offer a stronger critique of capitalist inequality than earlier postcolonial fiction writers and critics, then, partly because the period in which they write is one marked by disappointment. However, their assessments also tend to be more robust because of their collective interest in how older forms of exploitation (such as colonialism) are linked to newer forms (such as neo-liberalism) due to their mutual constitution through the unfettered expansion of capitalism. In pointing to these continuities and the way they are documented in the contemporary Anglophone novel, I join critics such as Gopal, Timothy Brennan, and Neil Lazarus, who have each, in different ways, critiqued postcolonial studies for its theorization of imperialism as a political encounter between the "East" and "West" without taking capitalism into account.[5] For colonialism involved not just the systematic annihilation of whole communities through political conquest and

the hegemonic imposition of aesthetic tastes and preferences but also 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 exploring the realities of the globalized present through the figure of the domestic servant. In doing so, her text does more than display a reforming impulse; it is also part of a larger trend of extending the category of the postcolonial to the creation and increasing hegemony of a capitalist world system.

Domestic servant narratives such as Umrigar's are invested in registering and criticizing the workings of neo-liberal and neo-colonial capitalist ideologies. If we read *The Space Between Us* in this vein, the text is 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. The novel is particularly adept at revealing the fictional nature of discourses about capitalism's historically progressive nature and captures the troubling consequences of what Marxist thinkers label "combined and uneven development." As the Warwick Research Collective outlines, this is a characterization that reveals the myth of capitalist "development" because capitalist modernity is better understood as producing and being governed by unevenness, a "coexistence," in any given place and time, of pre-capitalist and capitalist formations (12). The domestic servant figure is a fitting embodiment of these contradictions because she represents the coming together of neoliberal inequalities tied to "development" and 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). In this situation, the servant typically receives nominal payment in exchange for labor that comes with an expectation of internalized and embodied subjugation and segregation, including previously caste-driven taboos about touching, using the same household items as one's employers, and bodily proximity. These cultures of segregation have endured, albeit in changed forms, from pre-colonial and feudal to modern times. As such, domestic servitude is a permanent constituent of identity that produces expectations of loyalty, deference, and even self-abasement on one side, and varying degrees of obligation on the other (Ray and Qayum 26).

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

Such a reading also conflicts with Geetanjali Singh Chadha's argument that *The Space Between Us* highlights a conflict between patriarchal, feudal sources of tradition and emancipatory forms of modernity.[6] Instead, I suggest that the novel connects urban, capitalist modernity to seemingly outdated and "traditional" modes of segregation. The novel makes this connection by demonstrating how insidious pre-capitalist cultures of servitude work with the Lockean fiction of "property in the person" to oppress the servant (Locke sect. 27). "Property in the person" refers to the idea that a person's capacity for work—her abilities and attributes—are her property. Critics such as Carol Pateman suggest that "property in the person" is a fiction because it assumes that one's abilities

and attributes are separate from the body and alienable from the self (150). The presupposition that a person's abilities are separable objects or commodities to be used objectifies and commodifies the person herself. In the process, the domestic servant is transformed into a subordinate "other" who embodies subjugation and difference in the ways dictated by pre-capitalist cultures of caste-based bodily segregation.

In addition to subjecting such capitalist fictions of "development" to analytical scrutiny, Umrigar's novel recuperates an alternative ethics of being that undermines such an embodiment 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 as an agent of exploitation and the servant "other" 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 readerly empathy toward 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, which involves feelings *for* but not *of* another. 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" (5).[7] *The Space Between Us* fosters this empathic state of mind by foregrounding the perspectives of the female servant through its representations of Bhima's consciousness, including her inner monologues. Although the key events of Bhima's and Sera's lives are intimately tied, the narrative begins and ends with Bhima's point of view, which is juxtaposed with, and in turn decenters, the socially privileged voice of her employer. This focus 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 careful social reflection that can both deconstruct exploitative economic formations and recuperate forms of ethical being and action toward those whom Bhima represents.

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

Karl Marx's 1867 text *Capital: Critique of Political Economy* critiqued 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, Pateman argues that the ability to separate one's labor power from one's person is a political fiction. 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), this labor power, unlike a physical piece of property, is not separable from the person of the worker. The worker's capacities are developed over time and form an integral part of her self and identity, constituting her will, understanding, and experience. This means that a person does not have the same relationship to the property in her own person as she does to other types of property, because labor power is integral to personhood (Pateman 150–51). Since labor power cannot 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 thus 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 perpetuates the kinds of subjugation that buttress the globalized capitalist system.

Moreover, as the novel testifies, within the private sphere of the home, female domestic servants are triply subordinated by the globalized economic system: as citizens, women, and domestic servants. As a long line of social contract theorists including John Locke, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and John Rawls have argued, the maintenance of the capitalist system 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 social order that allows them to live freely. However, as Pateman elaborates 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 (11). This

means that both the public and private spheres depend on a sexual division of labor in which women are subordinated to men (116–53). When paid domestic labor is introduced into this equation, women/wives take responsibility as employers of the servant within the private sphere. Thus, 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 captures the tensions between the body as person and the body as property that are contained in the figure of the female domestic servant. It explores what these tensions mean for the relationship between the employer and servant and illuminates the systemic material and cultural power structures, including economic and gender relations, that produce their behaviors. In particular, the novel reveals how the fiction of property in the person underpins Bhima's subordination and exploitation by showing how Sera conceptualizes Bhima's abilities and attributes as commodities to be used while being unaware of how 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 . . . [S]he 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. But how to tell Serabai all this? (Umrigar 19)

The moment reveals the idea of property in the person to be a fiction: Bhima's ability to wash dishes is 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 body is left marked by her servitude. The co-option of Bhima's entire person by Sera's employment turns Bhima herself into a dishwashing machine appreciated only in terms of her capacity to perform household tasks. Bhima-as-washing-machine is a metaphor for Bhima's commodification and objectification.

The passage produces the reader's empathy not just through such content but also through its form, which successfully integrates several streams of information that juxtapose the points of view of the female employer, the female servant, and the people related to the two, all while privileging Bhima's perspective. This textual strategy enables the novel to illuminate the multiple levels of subordination inflicted on Bhima's person. Viraf and Sera represent the different 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 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 dishwasher and effectively signposts Bhima's labor as a replaceable commodity while simultaneously conveying concern for her frail working body; as the matriarch, Sera refuses the offer and seems to protect Bhima and her position as a laborer by boasting about the quality of Bhima's labor, even though this ignores Bhima's frailties and fatigue. The third-person narrative represents these viewpoints but privileges Bhima's perspective by making it the only one expressed through her

own consciousness and interiority. Sera's position overdetermines her relationship with Bhima so that her affection for her servant is negated by her 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 middle-class readers, the text makes the latter subtly aware of these conflicting positions and encourages them to empathize with Bhima's point of view. Indeed, instead of the servant figure serving as a foil to the employer, as Bruce Robbins notes is the case in much Victorian fiction, Sera is a vehicle through which Bhima's interiority is fleshed out. The servant figure is elevated from mere stereotype into someone with whom it is possible to identify and empathize.

Other passages of the novel also indicate that the invisible terms of the employment contract result in the commodification of workers. After Bhima's husband, Gopal, is fired and cheated out of a compensation package following an accident at work, he despondently notes that,

> [o]ne 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. (Umrigar 226).

The text's characterization of Bhima as a washing machine and Gopal as a hammer suggests that the logical (albeit extreme) corollary of the fiction of property in the person—which treats an individual's labor as something alienable—translates into the person 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.

Yet the text also shows how human subjectivity resists such commodification; the laboring self 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. (304)

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. 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 wholehearted, 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 presumed by the employer. It is Bhima and not Sera who feels 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's affection for her employer and pride in her work are pointless and run counter to her own interests, for to Sera 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 Bhima's consciousness and carefully delineating the emotions she feels as she surveys the kitchen. The text's representation of her emotions effectively undermines the notion that she is in fact just a laboring machine and undoes the alienation and exploitation of the labor contract. As Keen writes, character identification often invites empathy, even when the fictional character and readers differ from one another in all sorts of practical and obvious ways (x). In this passage, the reader is invited 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 them, is also transferred to the reader. As a result, her anger toward Sera at the passage's end, as she reminds herself how "these people discarded you like an old, stale slice of bread" (Umrigar 311), is also transferred to the middle-class reader.

The implied metaphor of Bhima as Sera'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 blocked off from Bhima, whom Sera essentializes as the absolute other in order to shore up her own middle-class identity, despite the commonalities between 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 Sera will handle the news that her admired son-in-law is actually an adulterous rapist. In that moment, the narrator reminds us that Bhima will never know how Sera will process this realization; she does not have access to Sera's consciousness: "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 in and produced by their class roles and the fiction of property in the person that their humanity is forced into abeyance and their relationship with each other curtailed.

This uneven dynamic is also represented in the novel's narrative form. We are presented with the question of Sera's internal reaction to Bhima's horrendous revelation about Viraf only through Bhima's wonderings about Sera's point of view. Sera's interiority thus appears twice removed and foreclosed to the reader. While this formal device orchestrates Bhima's realization that Sera's state of mind will never be accessible to someone like her, it simultaneously suggests that Sera's point of view is

not as important as the objective truth of Viraf's treachery. Significantly, while postcolonial theory often suggests that representing the subaltern other is 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.[8]

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" (311), the social world in which the novel is set completely disregards it. 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. This 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 (275). Umrigar is careful to highlight this act as a chore for 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" (275). That Maya is doing her job is an interpretation supported by the narrative voice's 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 feels able to use Maya's body in a way that constitutes a breach of her selfhood. Maya is nothing but labor power to Viraf, and he sees her as able to satisfy his bodily urges, from easing the knot in his neck to providing 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" (278). Viraf's use of Maya as a commodity that satisfies a need 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?'" (280). The careless nonchalance with which he throws this command her way testifies to Viraf's reduction of Maya to an embodiment of waged labor. Yet the narrative form consistently undermines this social understanding and invites empathy for Maya by privileging her feelings in the moment. Viraf's sexual frustration is literally a background noise; instead, the "clanging bells of [Maya's] own fear" are foregrounded, alerting the reader that what has happened is a rape (278). When Viraf leaves Maya, the reader does not walk out with him, but instead is left behind with Maya's crouched, injured, and fearful body, seeing her "hurt, cowering look" (278), and sharing the prospect of washing her virginal blood off her employer's sheets.

These sheets, which can be washed to erase any evidence of wrongdoing, are 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 and never has to pay for his crime because the assumption that Maya's entire self, along with her labor, is up for sale allows him to believe he has already paid. The washable sheets signal 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. 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.

II. Cultivating Distinction Through the Fiction of "Property in the Person"

Because the fiction of "property in the person" is so precarious, it must constantly be maintained through the "cultures of servitude" that culti-

vate a distinction between employer and servant. As Bridget Anderson suggests (20) and Ray and Qayyum confirm, this sense of difference is a foundational premise of the culture of servitude (Ray and Qayyum 26) and is aided by persistent feudal notions of untouchability. The servant's difference is continually reinforced by a performed superiority on the part of the employer. In other words, class is not a stable identity from which various acts proceed; rather, it is an identity partly constituted through the bodily stylization of the employer as socially superior.

The Space Between Us testifies to this theorization of class as a performative identity through its representation of Sera's middle-class community, which partakes in a repeated cultivation of distinction founded on the premise that servants are an inherently inferior species. As Aban, one of Sera's best friends puts it, "[T]hese ghatis are ghatis" (Umrigar 236). The word "ghati" is Hindi slang used to denote an uncultured and ignorant person. While the average middle-class Indian 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 by testifying to employers' desperate necessity of classifying servants as an absolute "other." Indeed, these characters continue to refer to domestic servants 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). The employer reinforces class through a series of culturally constructed assumptions about the inferior "other," even while servant identity is figured as a pre-discursive, unquestionable reality. Servants' inferiority is repeatedly performed and embodied on the part of both employer and employed.

Serabai reverts to this belief system in times of emotional pressure, immediately blaming Bhima's claim 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 this belief system by revealing "low-class" status to be a construction through which the employer acquires her own sense of self rather than a biological fact. As

Anderson writes, the employer produces 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 production not only by maintaining objects that indicate status (polishing the silver or ironing clothes, for example), but also by serving as a foil to the lady of the house. Thus, domestic work is not definable in terms of tasks but is instead defined in terms of a role that constructs and situates the worker within a set of physical, cultural, and ideological social relationships (Anderson 19). When the Indian middle-class reader finds herself responding with familiarity and disgust to Sera's actions, she is forced to face the idea that what she considers innate to her own subjectivity is in fact socially produced through the repression of all that 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 difference between servants and employers is emphasized via spatial segregation and through an understanding of the servant body as a site of pollution. 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 preserving the metaphorical space of class position, an imperative that explains why, even when Bhima is perilously ill, Sera leaves her to recuperate in the open air of the balcony rather than give her one of the family's spare beds. Indeed, "the thought of her sleeping on one of their beds had been too repulsive to Sera. . . . [W]hen it was time to give Bhima her pills, Sera made sure that she plopped them in Bhima's open palm without making contact" (Umrigar 115). 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 because it undermines her understanding of herself as socially progressive.

Just as Judith Butler suggests that gender is produced through the bodily repetition of acts over time and is disrupted by a break in that repetition (520), Umrigar represents class identity as performatively achieved through the constant stylization of the body and easily threatened by the interruption or subversive repetition of that style. 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 her employer's performed class identity if she simply refuses to inhabit her designated role. A number of characters in Umrigar's novel seem aware of the precarity of their superior social position. Sera's husband advises: "Servants have to be kept in their place. . . . [Y]ou can't treat these people too well. Best to keep them at some distance. Otherwise they will take advantage of you, hundred percent guaranteed" (Umrigar 170). Echoing these beliefs, Sera displays an ambivalent response to her daughter Dinaz's close, unfettered relationship with Bhima:

> 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. . . . [S]he herself had on numerous occasions declared that Bhima was one of the cleanest people she knew. (29)

There is no reason why Dinaz should not hug Bhima, as Serabai points out. Rather, Sera's horror is a response to what the hug represents—a threat to her performed superiority. Serabai's definition of herself in relation to Bhima is so powerful that it produces a body that is physically "repulsed" by its proximity to the servant and must be cordoned off from the "other." This kind of discipline is symbolized, for example, by the washing of hands. Yet Serabai is more than irrationally prejudiced. She is also a modern subject of human rights discourse, well-versed in the mechanics of historical oppressions and the corresponding struggles for equality between humans. Sera's class identity

mandates that she maintain a bodily distance from Bhima, but she is also simultaneously aware that such discrimination is deplorable and irrational. This explains why Sera is "seared by conflicting emotions—pride and awe at the casual ease with which Dinaz had broken an unspoken taboo."

The narrative repeatedly and deliberately presents Sera as possessing a split subjectivity. She is capable of the utmost kindness and compassion toward Bhima even as she maintains underlying prejudices about Bhima's innate difference. This characterization may be a textual strategy on Umrigar's part, for it enables middle-class readers to more easily identify with Sera (and reflect on their own attitudes) than if she was presented in a more extreme manner. In order to make this kind of readerly identification with and ultimate repudiation of Sera even more pronounced, the text includes an account of Sera's sufferings as a new bride forced to abide by her mother-in-law's rule that a menstruating woman be quarantined, made to use separate utensils and eat meals alone in her bedroom. The juxtaposition of Bhima's suffering at Sera's hands and Sera's at her mother-in-law's draws parallels between the different situations to underscore the unfairness of Bhima's treatment:

> 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. (82)

The reader first recognizes and possibly identifies with the pain of Sera's mistreatment and is then forced to transfer that perspectival lens to Gulab, a servant figure and 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 how 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 the abuse the wife then directs at the domestic servant, reducing a fellow human being to not much more than a site of pollution. Umrigar's comparison of the treatment of wives and servants—even as she highlights the class opposition between the two—helps elicit readerly empathy for the servant since it negates the reader-employer's understanding of the "other" as different from the self.

III. Embodying Empathy and Narrowing the "Space Between Us"

Various theorists have contested the literary impulse to create and experience narrative empathy,[9] with Keen even suggesting that the claim that novel reading necessarily leads to empathy is a "cultural imperialism of the emotions" (147–48) that supposedly impedes political engagement rather than aids it.[10] Yet a number of writers, including Umrigar, have demonstrated the liberating potential of evoking what Keen terms "broadcast strategic empathy," which calls 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 postcolonial novels that make the domestic servant their central figure partake in such a project, extending readers' sense of a shared humanity.

In an effort to respond to domestic regimes of discrimination and evoke empathy, *The Space Between Us* posits a universalizing humanity by theorizing a body that is constituted by an affective materiality rather than being simply an embodiment of commodified labor or an emblem of difference. The term "affect" is often used interchangeably with "passion," "sentiment," "mood," "feeling," and "emotion," but, as Brian Massumi and Theresa Brennan note, 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 linked with its own corporeality, the other bodies with which it comes into contact, and its environment. In other words, this is a body defined by its emotional interactions with its environment and other people (Brennan 6).[11]

This conception of the body's materiality as constituted through its connection to others is perhaps most powerfully articulated by Sera after a particularly bad beating from her husband:

> [P]erhaps 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 radical; in this ontology, Bhima's body has just as much value, if not more, than anyone else's. Indeed, through her selfless touch, Bhima is the healing masseuse of Serabai's body, skillfully rubbing out Sera's wounds through her hands. However, 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" (108). 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'" (109). The generosity of this touch forces Sera to look upon Bhima as "another human being" (109) instead of just a servant. Indeed, Bhima's selfless caring and redemptive healing far surpasses what is required of her as Sera's servant and is responsible for Sera'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" (109). Symbolically, this affective rebirth suggests that Bhima

emerges as Sera's mother, a role reversal that demonstrates 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 and undoes an ontology based on discrimination and bodily segregation. Bhima contains Sera's body within her own, 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 be recovered.

The liberating or insidious touches of another human being serve as framing counterpoints in the novel, through Bhima's massage as well as the other, very different, massage that Maya performs on Viraf. One metaphorically gives birth to a new life, while the other, by resulting in the conception and subsequent abortion of Maya and Viraf's child, causes a new life to end. The massages encapsulate two opposing worldviews and bodily ontologies: one marked by generosity and selflessness and the other by greed, conquest, and the satisfaction of personal needs. 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 a refusal of the segregation that underpins capitalist exploitation. As an embodiment of the suffering inflicted by these regimes, the figure of the domestic servant provides a particularly strong critique of India's capitalist expansion under neoliberalism, as well as the uneven development that results.

I will end with one of the novel's most searing passages, which encapsulates India's plunge into neoliberal 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, because 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 in a particular direction regardless of the human collateral. Moreover, this power is not colonial but neo-colonial; it is the result of a new transnational system of brutality that divides humans 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; although she knows the journey is life-threatening, she has to work as a domestic servant in order to survive and therefore must make the trek. The novel captures the workings of a system of global power and privilege that thrives by homogenizing the globe into a marketplace, putting a price tag on everyone. If they do not measure up, they are simply "discarded like a package with no address on it." Umrigar's text concerns the lives of domestic servants who work at elite addresses without having permanent addresses of their own and are likely to be discarded when their labor power is exhausted. The novel points to the need for a hermeneutic that registers global

capital as the new colonialism, which unifies and homogenizes social experience all over the world, ironically by exaggerating cultural traditions and worldviews that create difference and cultivate distinction. Millennial domestic servant fiction, the literary movement of which *The Space Between* is a part, 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).

Notes

1 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 instance, while both *The White Tiger* and *The Space Between Us* focus on the domestic servant, Gajarawala notes that *The White Tiger* abandons realism in favor of a detrimental individualistic modernism that obscures rather than illuminates the social totality (147–50).

2 Writing about Victorian fiction, Robbins notes both "the exclusion of servants from literary representation" (ix) and the more surprising literary "effects" of the "power" of their invisible presence (ix, xi).

3 One example of this is Sidhwa's *Cracking India*, in which the nanny, Ayah, personifies a victimized nation in the throes of Partition and independence. Another is Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, in which 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.

4 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 (Desai and Pithouse 843).

5 See Gopal's *Literary Radicalism in India: Gender, Nation and the Transition to Independence* (8), Lazarus' "What Postcolonial Theory Doesn't Say," and Timothy Brennan's "Postcolonial Studies and Globalization Theory" (120–38).

6 Chanda argues that, within the domestic space, women's marginal status enables them to participate in modernity by ignoring class distinctions with one another; 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 how capitalist modernity involves an exacerbation rather than an alleviation of traditional structures of division (117–33).

7 While Keen emphasizes the capacity of literature to produce empathy, she does not suggest that empathy necessarily leads to what she calls "pro-social action"

on the part of the reader in the real world. See "Contesting Empathy" in Keen's *Empathy and the Novel*.

8 In Spivak's "Can the Subaltern Speak?", Spivak attacks intellectuals' act of representing or speaking for the subaltern, but 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.

9 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 Posner's "Against Ethical Criticism," Wood's *Slavery, Empathy and Pornography*, and Gourevitch's *We Wish to Inform You That Tomorrow We Will be Killed with our Families: Stories from Rwanda*.

10 For a critique of the claim that universal human emotions are inherently hegemonic, see Cohen's *States of Denial: Knowing about Atrocities and Suffering*, 279–301.

11 See Massumi's "Notes on the Translation and Acknowledgements." He writes:

> 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. (xvi)

See also Theresa Brennan's *The Transmission of Affect*. She 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'" (Brennan 6).

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