

RESEARCH ARTICLE



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**In-Betweenness and the Immigrant Self in Thrity Umrigar's
*If Today Be Sweet***

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Abstract

Migration represents a defining and deeply disruptive transition in human experience, fundamentally reshaping an individual's sense of identity, belonging, and place in the world. Migration from one's homeland to a foreign country entails geographical displacement coupled with profound psychological and cultural rupture. The process of adapting to a new cultural environment and negotiating unfamiliar social norms, value systems, and ways of life often gives rise to feelings of alienation, loss, and identity crisis. This article is an attempt to study this complex process in Thrity Umrigar's *If Today Be Sweet*, using Homi K. Bhabha's concept of in-between space as a theoretical framework. Umrigar's narrative illuminates the psychological and cultural cost of immigration through Tehmina Sethna, a Parsi widow caught between the familiarity of Bombay and the alienating modernity of suburban Cleveland. Employing a qualitative method of close textual analysis, the study applies Bhabha's framework to examine the protagonist Tehmina Sethna's navigation of cultural displacement. The study draws attention to the emotional and psychological dimensions of migration, demonstrating that the immigrant experience is neither wholly assimilative nor entirely anchored in the past. Rather, it is marked by ambivalence, resilience, and the continual negotiation between memory and new modes of belonging. The study also examines the literary representation of in-between space, contending that immigrant identity constitutes a continuously negotiated and reconstructed process in which the sense of belonging emerges as a fundamental necessity for establishing stability and reconstituting a coherent sense of self in an unfamiliar environment.

Keywords: In-Between Space, Immigration, Identity Negotiation, Estrangement.

INTRODUCTION

Migration across national boundaries transcends the mere act of physical relocation and involves a complex and multifaceted reconfiguration of an individual's sense of self, belonging, and cultural identity. Settling in an unfamiliar land involves cultural negotiation, reconstruction of identity, and adaptation to new social and cultural environments. Migration has significantly contributed to the diversification of cultures, ethnicities, and racial groups in developed countries. Migration entails multiple stressors that impact personal well-being, including the loss of cultural norms, religious customs, and social support systems, alongside changes in identity and sense of self. Such people undergo a series of transformations that substantially alter their sense of identity over time. Confronted with an environment that is simultaneously familiar and alien in its cultural expressions, the immigrant is compelled to engage in a continuous process of adaptation and identity reconstruction.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Studies on immigrant experience and cultural displacement has occupied a central place in literary scholarship for several decades. Scholars have long recognized literature as one of the most significant mediums through which the psychological and cultural dimensions of the immigrant experience are examined. Immigrant literature has been critically examined as a literary domain in which issues of identity, memory, nostalgia, and cultural negotiation converge, thereby serving as a significant and productive site for scholarly inquiry within literary and cultural studies. The concept of in-betweenness and the construction of the immigrant self have received significant scholarly attention in both postcolonial and diaspora studies.

Stuart Hall's essay, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora" (1990), further explores the shifting, fragmented nature of identity in diasporic contexts. Hall argues that identity is not fixed

but is "always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation." His work is important for understanding how immigrants continually remake themselves, drawing on both their past and present worlds. In *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities* (1996), Avtar Brah examines the lived realities of diaspora and the politics of belonging. Brah's analysis of the 'diaspora space' as a site of intersection between the native and the migrant, as well as the past and the present, provides valuable tools for interpreting the immigrant self as inherently hybrid and situated within multiple, sometimes conflicting, cultural narratives. Vijay Mishra's book, *The Literature of the Indian Diaspora: Theorizing the Diasporic Imaginary* (2007), specifically engages with Indian immigrant literature. Mishra discusses the "diasporic imaginary" as a space of longing, nostalgia, and negotiation, where the hyphen becomes both a bridge and a barrier. Paul Gilroy's seminal work, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (1993), introduces the concept of "double consciousness" as a defining feature of diasporic identity. Gilroy's discussion of the tension between origin and destination, tradition and modernity, enriches any analysis of in-betweenness, particularly in the context of postcolonial immigrant narratives.

While these foundational works illuminate the complexity of diasporic identity, hybridity, existing literature often treats the "in-between" space as an abstract or collective phenomenon, seldom probing the everyday realities of how individual immigrants experience and negotiate this liminality. This study addresses this gap by focusing on Thrity Umrigar's *If Today Be Sweet*, offering a close reading that foregrounds the protagonist's personal navigation of the hyphen, that is caught not only between two cultures, but also between conflicting emotions, expectations, and senses of self. The study focuses on how the protagonist embodies the sense of living in the hyphen, constantly navigating but never fully

reconciling the values, memories, and expectations of the homeland with those of the adopted country. Guided by Bhabha's theory of the in-between space, this article foregrounds the emotional and psychological realities of straddling two worlds, highlighting how this state of suspension shapes the immigrant self.

METHODOLOGY

The study employs a qualitative approach, drawing on close textual analysis to demonstrate that in-between space in Umrigar's *If Today Be Sweet* is constituted through deeply personal imperatives that illuminate the complexity of adaptation. Thrity Umrigar's narrative constitutes the primary literary source of this study, with Tehmina Sethna's negotiation of identity in suburban Ohio serving as the central site of analysis. The study is grounded in close reading of the protagonist's in-between state, examining the cultural disorientation that marks her early residence in America and the relational and ethical commitments that gradually draw her toward integration into the host society. Homi K. Bhabha's concept of the in-between space, as articulated in his foundational work *The Location of Culture*, serves as a primary theoretical lens through which the study examines Tehmina Sethna's in-between state in Umrigar's narrative. Key narrative events including Tehmina's displacement from her place of origin, her initial discomfort with American social norms, and her eventual decision to remain in the United States are examined as critical textual sites that illuminate her shifting state that shapes her immigrant experience. Secondary sources drawn from the fields of diaspora studies, postcolonial literary criticism, and migration theory situate the textual analysis within a broader critical conversation about immigrant identity, cultural belonging, and displacement.

ANALYSIS

The study is a depiction of the immigrant's experience of in-betweenness, revealing the complexities and tensions of

straddling two cultural worlds. Thrity Umrigar's *If Today Be Sweet* presents its protagonist Tehmina Sethna, a Parsi widow who had migrated to the United States from Bombay. She navigates a cultural landscape that is at once familiar through her son and profoundly alien in its values, norms, and practices. Upon her arrival in the United States following her husband's death, Tehmina's initial acculturation trajectory is marked by a significant retreat into introspection. This withdrawal is rooted in the reservoirs of memory, the cultural framework of Parsi identity, and the social environment of Bombay. This functions as a deliberate strategy through which she seeks to preserve her sense of self amid the challenges and uncertainties associated with migration. The study reflects on how the immigrant self is marked by contradiction, ambivalence, and a persistent sense of suspension. Tehmina's position in the in-between space is identical to that of Jane, as Megan Clark writes that "Jane's world is not simply a separation from the family, but a liminal sphere that is caught in between two worlds" (p. 20).

Umrigar depicts Tehmina as a figure consumed by grief, memory, and Parsi identity. This positions her separation from American culture as a consequence of inward preoccupation rather than outward hostility. Following her husband's demise, Tehmina's grief limits her ability to confront the pivotal decision that shapes her migratory trajectory to embed herself within the domesticated social terrain of suburban America alongside her son Sorab or to return to the vividly sensuous, familiar world of Bombay. Tehmina's aversion to the suburban landscape transcends mere dissatisfaction, reflecting deeper acculturative tensions. The American cultural landscape embodies a set of values like individualism, emotional restraint, and self-sufficiency, that stand in direct opposition to the communal, relationally grounded world that has long constituted the fabric of Tehmina's existence.

Her orientation toward Bombay constitutes a construct shaped by memory and longing, which preserves her sense of self amid conditions of displacement. Tehmina's daily life is a study in contrasts. On the one hand, she is drawn to the familiarity and comfort of her Indian heritage, its language, rituals, and memories of family left behind. On the other, she has to adapt to the expectations and rhythms of American society, especially as she navigates her role within her son's family and the broader community.

Individuals negotiating cultural displacement frequently reconstitute their place of origin through memory and imagination. Tehmina's world is surfacing through a persistent recollection of her painted bedroom in Bombay and the lived landscape of the city in which she had resided most of her life (20). Berry in *Acculturation: A Personal Journey across Cultures* claims that when an individual wishes to place a value on holding on to their original culture and wish to avoid interaction with others, it is defined as a separation alternative (22).

Umrigar's depiction of Tehmina's experience at the farmers' market carries a narrative significance. She states, "Tehmina loved being at the farmers' market. She felt comfortable and human, here" (35). The farmers' market emerges, within Tehmina's experience, as a spatial reproduction of Bombay. The noise, density, and organic vitality generating a moment of cultural recognition rooted in personal memory and belonging. The narrative often juxtaposes scenes of domestic routine in suburban America with memories of life in Bombay, highlighting the subtle but persistent friction between past and present. Tehmina's sensory experiences like the taste, smells, and sounds, not only become factors that triggers her past, but also act as reminders of her displacement. Even mundane acts, such as cooking or shopping, are fraught with the awareness of difference: ingredients are not quite the same, customs are unfamiliar, and

unspoken rules must be learned anew. These details illustrate how the "in-between space" manifests not only in major life decisions but also in the fabric of everyday existence. Bhabha in *The Location of Culture* writes:

The access to the image of identity is only ever possible in the negation of any sense of originality or plenitude; the process of displacement and differentiation (absence/presence, representation/repetition) renders it a liminal reality. The image is at once a metaphoric substitution, an illusion of presence, and by that same token a metonym, a sign of its absence and loss. (p. 73)

The study highlights the subtle forms of loss and longing that haunt the immigrant experience. Tehmina's nostalgia for India is not only a yearning for familiar landscapes and routines but also a mourning for relationships and a sense of self that seem irretrievably altered by migration. The novel captures how such longing is compounded by guilt, the feeling of having left behind loved ones, traditions, and even parts of oneself in pursuit of an uncertain future. These emotional undercurrents contribute to Tehmina's sense of being perpetually unsettled. It is important to note that the "in-between space" is not merely cultural or geographic, but profoundly psychological, marked by the ongoing effort to reconcile what has been lost with what must be embraced.

This reveals that Tehmina's separation operates as an active and deliberate search for continuity of selfhood. Tehmina's navigation of the American environment is defined by a conscious attempt to establish connections between her present setting and the familiar world she has left behind. This duality is not resolved through synthesis. Rather, Tehmina's identity is shaped by a continual negotiation between longing for what has been lost and the pressure to embrace what is new. Her internal monologue frequently returns to India, yet she

is acutely aware of the need to find belonging in her adopted country, both for herself and for the sake of her family. This places her in an in-between state. It is that "unbearable ordeal of the collapse of certainty" (p. 214).

The struggle to belong is further complicated by Tehmina's relationships with those around her. Her son, Sorab, stands as a figure of partial assimilation. "For years, visiting India had been hard on him" (Umrigar, 2007, p. 174). In contrast to Tehmina's experience of separation, her son Sorab embodies a state of near-complete integration. Sorab's prolonged residence in America has facilitated the internalization of its cultural values. This encompasses both professional aspirations and familial structures while simultaneously preserving aspects of his Parsi identity. Having built a life in America, he embodies both the possibilities and anxieties of integration. Tehmina must navigate her own expectations of familial duty and the changing dynamics of her mother-son relationship, which are shaped by differing attitudes toward tradition and modernity. Tehmina reflects, with a blend of pride and sorrow, that her son's integration into American society entails significant loss. Tehmina observes in her son the gradual erosion of a once fierce civic conscience gradually consumed by the professional ethos of corporate American life, his values reoriented by the dominant culture of his adopted society. "Susan and Sorab, they both work so hard...for what are they working so hard?" (31). The novel's central acculturative tension is figured as an opposition between Tehmina's separationist disposition and Sorab's integrationist orientation.

Tehmina's in-betweenness is not depicted as a site of creative reconciliation, but as an ongoing, often uneasy, reality. "the subject of cultural difference becomes a problem that Walter Benjamin has described as the irresolution, or liminality, of 'translation', the element of resistance in the process of transformation" (p.321). While she finds

moments of connection and even belonging, these are interspersed with episodes of doubt, homesickness, and the acute awareness of difference. The study foregrounds the emotional and psychological costs of living in the hyphen, the sense of partial belonging in either world. The immigrant self must also engage in the persistent labor of linguistic, cultural, and emotional translation that accompanies this experience. The hyphen, in Umrigar's narrative, is not merely a grammatical marker but a lived condition, one characterized by tension, negotiation, and the lack of final resolution. The study also highlights the resilience and adaptability that emerge within this state of in-betweenness. While Tehmina's story is suffused with tension and ambivalence, it is also marked by moments of agency and quiet strength. Her ability to find small joys and gestures of connection, whether through sharing food, participating in community events, or forming new friendships, suggests that life in the hyphen is not solely defined by conflict or estrangement. Instead, the study presents in-betweenness as a complex, dynamic process that shapes, challenges, and sometimes enriches the immigrant self. By resisting simplistic narratives of assimilation or alienation, the study is an exploration of how individuals navigate the uncertainties of hybrid identity, ultimately affirming the multifaceted nature of the immigrant experience.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of this study demonstrate that Tehmina Sethna's immigrant experience in Thrity Umrigar's *If Today Be Sweet* is governed by a discernible state of in-betweenness. The close reading of Umrigar's narrative is a profound and persistent experience of in-betweenness that shapes the immigrant self, particularly for immigrants like Tehmina. Rather than focusing on resolving tension between the old and the new world, the study foregrounds the condition of straddling both, living in a liminal space that is at once unsettling. In Umrigar's narrative, Tehmina

does not move linearly from her old Indian world to a new American one. Instead, she remains suspended between them, constantly negotiating her sense of self. This state extends beyond cultural difference and is deeply embedded in daily practices, emotions, and relationships. Tehmina's longing for India surfaces in her rituals, culinary choices, and memories, even as she adapts to American customs and norms. The study thus resists the narrative of assimilation as a final destination and instead presents identity as an ongoing, unfinished process. This finding challenges much of the established literature on migration, which often conceptualizes the immigrant journey as a movement toward integration or synthesis. The analysis demonstrates that for Tehmina, and by extension for many immigrants, the hyphen is not a bridge to be crossed, but a liminal zone that must be inhabited, with all its complexities and challenges. Another key result is the centrality of emotional and psychological experiences in shaping the sense of in-betweenness.

Umrigar's narrative gives voice to the subtle, often unspoken feelings of loss, nostalgia, and guilt that accompany migration. Tehmina's memories of her late husband and the community she left behind are not simply sentimental, but are integral to her sense of identity and belonging. The analysis demonstrates that these feelings are not readily alleviated by forming new attachments or attaining accomplishments in the host country. Rather, they endure over time, influencing Tehmina's relationships with her family, her neighbours, and her own sense of self. By centering Tehmina's internal landscape, the study highlights the need to consider the lived, psychological realities of in-betweenness. The experience of being "caught between" arises not merely from external circumstances. It is also experienced acutely on an individual, subjective level.

Family and community emerge as crucial sites where in-betweenness is both experienced

and negotiated. Tehmina's relationship with her son, Sorab, is emblematic of the generational dynamics that shape the immigrant experience. While Sorab is more assimilated and pragmatic about life in America, Tehmina clings to the values and memories of her Indian upbringing. Their interactions are often marked by misunderstanding, but also by mutual care and adaptation. Interactions with the wider community further highlight the complexities of belonging. Tehmina encounters both hospitality and subtle exclusion, finding moments of connection alongside reminders of her outsider status.

Memory operates as a bridge and a barrier, connecting Tehmina to her past while complicating her efforts to build a new sense of home. The novel pays close attention to the embodied nature of these experiences. Tehmina's sensory memories like the taste of familiar foods, the sound of distant voices, the feel of her late husband's presence are depicted. "the aromas of food that they loved and missed" (Umrigar, 2007, p. 163). Such moments anchor her in her Indian identity even as she navigates American spaces. This illustrates her ongoing experience of in-betweenness on a visceral level. The results further reveal that Tehmina's separation strategy in the narrative is a response to profound loss. In this regard, Tehmina's initial separation is expressed as a withdrawal into the self rather than as an outright rejection of America. It is Tehmina's moral intervention, grounded in her deepest values, that bridges the distance between her separationist disposition and her integration into American life.

Despite the challenges of in-betweenness, the study highlights the resilience and adaptability that can emerge from this condition. Tehmina's journey is marked by moments of agency and quiet strength: she forges new friendships, participates in community life, and finds ways to celebrate her heritage in unfamiliar surroundings. The novel suggests that living in the hyphen, while often uncomfortable, can also be a source of creativity

and renewal. Tehmina's ability to adapt without erasing her past points to the potential for immigrants to carve out spaces of belonging within the liminal zone of in-betweenness. This insight complicates simplistic narratives of assimilation or alienation, offering a more dynamic and process-oriented understanding of immigrant identity. The analysis affirms that resilience is not the absence of tension, but the capacity to navigate and endure it, finding meaning and connection amidst uncertainty.

Through its attention to interiority, emotion, and the mundane details of daily life, literature can render visible the subtle forms of straddling and suspension that define the immigrant self. While this study provides a detailed analysis of in-betweenness in *If Today Be Sweet*, it is important to acknowledge its limitations. The focus on a single novel and protagonist may not capture the full diversity of immigrant experiences, particularly those shaped by gender, class, religion, or other intersecting identities. Future research could undertake comparative analyses with other works of South Asian diaspora literature or explore how second-generation immigrants navigate the hyphen in different ways. Additionally, interdisciplinary studies combining literary analysis with ethnographic or psychological research could further deepen our understanding of the lived realities of in-betweenness.

CONCLUSION

Umrigar's work demonstrates the enduring reality of in-betweenness as an essential feature of immigrant life, vividly portraying how the immigrant self navigates the challenges and ambiguities of living on the hyphen. The study foregrounds the complexity of Tehmina's identity as she moves through American society while carrying the indelible imprint of her Indian heritage. In-betweenness is depicted as a lived and ongoing negotiation, shaped by the interplay of longing, adaptation, and memory. Tehmina's experience is marked

by moments of nostalgia and loss, which exist alongside new connections and evolving forms of belonging. These layered experiences reveal that for many immigrants, the sense of living between worlds is not an obstacle to be overcome, but an adaptive response to the realities of migration. The hyphen becomes a site of both tension and possibility, where identity is continuously redefined through everyday encounters, choices, and reflections.

The study's close reading of Umrigar's narrative, grounded in Bhabha's theory of the "in-between space," affirms the importance of examining the subtle, affective dimensions of immigrant life. Tehmina's experiences bring to the fore the emotional labor involved in maintaining ties to the past while building a future in an unfamiliar land. Her engagement with memory is complex as the past offers comfort and continuity, while simultaneously serving as a reminder of what has been left behind. Family and community relationships further illustrate how in-betweenness shapes and is shaped by social interaction. Tehmina's connection to her son Sorab and his family is a source of both support and tension, as generational differences surface in attitudes toward belonging, tradition, and adaptation. The study identifies resilience and agency as integral to the experience of in-betweenness. Tehmina's experience is not defined solely by loss or alienation. Instead, it is characterized by her ability to adapt, to find meaning in new relationships, and to sustain cultural practices that anchor her sense of self.

The study demonstrates that Tehmina Sethna's experience is driven by a process of transformation. It also establishes that literature constitutes a productive and necessary site for the study of in-betweenness, illuminating its interior experience of grief, nostalgia, disorientation, and belonging. It resists binary outcomes of assimilation or estrangement, instead presenting a more fluid and dynamic understanding of identity, one that accommodates contradiction, ambiguity, and

continual change. By foregrounding the lived realities of straddling two worlds, the study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of migration and identity formation. The immigrant experience as depicted here is not reducible to a journey from one fixed point to another, but is characterized by ongoing movement—across spaces, languages, memories, and relationships.

The hyphen, far from being a mere grammatical marker, embodies the ongoing work of negotiation and meaning-making that defines immigrant life. It is not a problem to be solved, but a space to be inhabited, a site where loss and hope, memory and adaptation, tradition and transformation continually converge. The experience of in-betweenness in Umrigar's narrative is not a temporary predicament. Rather, it is a fundamental mode of being that permeates every aspect of the immigrant journey. By acknowledging and engaging with this complexity, both literature and society can cultivate a deeper and more empathetic understanding of what it means to inhabit the hyphen.

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