



# Exploring the Role of Places on the Formation of Self-identity in Thrity Umrigar's Novel *The Secrets Between Us*

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## Abstract

*A place is more than just a physical setting. It is produced with the influence of culture and society and shapes the identity of people. The article seeks to explore the interdependence of place and identity in the novel The Secrets Between Us by Thrity Umrigar. The article explores the role of places on identity through the character Bhima, a domestic help, using Harold H. Proshansky's place-identity concept. Bhima's identity undergoes significant development and changes from a housemaid to a human being as she moves to emancipating environments. She identifies her hidden acumen for business and presses onward with fresh optimism. She learns that she is more than a housemaid, that she is a woman with feelings, needs and a life like her mistresses. The article also explores the development of the identity of Parvati, who learns to identify herself as a woman at the very end of a life-time of identifying herself as trash and a whore.*

**Keywords:** identity, places, environmental past, cognition, self

Thrity Umrigar's novel *The Space Between Us* traces the development of the identity of two poor women, Bhima and Parvati, with regard to the places they live in and, their changing places or positions. Identity is a complex term. Identity is not static. It is highly complex, multi-faceted and constantly evolving. Erik Erikson calls identity the "fundamental organizing principle which develops constantly throughout the lifespan." Foucault believes that "everyone of us is the subject of discourse" (Adams), which means that our identity too is constructed by it. Hegel associates identity with "self-consciousness" (Wang). Identity, in simple terms, is a complex construct of one's perception of himself and others' perception of him.

It is significantly dependent on places. Harold, et al., identify a significant part of self-identity with regard to the physical place called "place-identity". Place-identity is "a sub-structure of the self-identity of the person consisting of, broadly conceived, cognitions about the physical world in which the individual lives" (Proshansky et al. 71). A few places constitute Bhima's world. Her place-identity determines her attachment to some places and detachment from the others. Identity is not independent of places because "Individuals . . . define who and what they are in terms of such strong affective ties to 'house and home' and/or neighborhood and community" (77).



### **Place-Identity or Social Identity**

Place-identity is not limited to physical places alone. It also includes one's psychological space, influenced by both the living-space and the place or position of the individual in the society and, shapes their identity because, as Ittelson claims "There is no physical environment that is not also a social environment, and vice-versa" (Proshansky et al. 78). Place-identity is "influenced by a wide range of personal/physical setting experiences and relationships based on a variety of physical contexts that from the moment of birth until death define people's day-to-day existence" (77). Bhima hails from a poor village and moves to the Mumbai city where she takes up job as housemaid at the house of Sera Dubash, a Parsi woman, and works for over twenty years until she is fired after a false accusation. She lives in a slum and identifies herself a servant and an inferior woman because she cooks for a rich family, is given separate utensils to eat with and has to sit on the floor. Bhima chooses the identity of a servant at a rich house over a poor, but independent and resilient individual. She reminisces about the Dubashes' house after she is dismissed. The place where she spends most of her time and her psychological place give her the identity that she adopts. Her identity, as Foucault claims, is shaped by the discourse of the society.

Place-identity includes "a host of attitudes, values, thoughts, beliefs, meanings, and behavior tendencies" (Proshansky et al. 77) connected with the places. Bhima has an "environmental past" (77) which continues to impact her conscience for years after she departs from the Dubashes' house. She compares every aspect of her present life, including its people, through the Dubashes' lens. Parvati too has one from the brothel. She compares the people and life outside to the people and life at the brothel. For Bhima, Parvati and Chitra, the expat from Australia, their environments leave an imprint on their identity that cannot be erased. Without their environmental past, their identity would be incomplete.

Maya's environmental past is written by the slum and the city. Her optimism and faith fostered by the loving-environment provided by Bhima, the recognition she receives at college for her intelligence and the friendship she receives from Chitra and Sunita, help her forget a traumatic past.

A few weeks at Sunita's apartment during her exams transforms her. On the day of the last exam, she asks Bhima, "Can I stay here one more night? I am so tired . . . And the basti (slum) is so noisy" (Umrigar 287). Her present environments stifle her timid and voiceless past and help her grow into a woman with resilience and choices.

### **Threat to Identity**

Though unaware of place-identity, people try to understand what is right or wrong with a surrounding and try to change it. Bhima realises that Mrs. Motorcyclewalla's house is detrimental to her and seeks an escape. In place-identity, "the person's actual experience is modified by the cognitive process of memory and interpretation and such others as fantasy and imagination" (Proshansky et al. 77). Parvati's memories and imaginations of the past restrict her from forming relationships in the future. In her delirious state, she hallucinates returning to the dreaded places of the past. Her fear causes her to embrace the present.

Certain places threaten the place-identity of people. In order to protect it, people tend to avoid any setting that poses a threat. Places and spaces "contribute significantly to self-identity . . . Negatively valenced cognitions . . . more significantly those settings . . . threaten his or her conceptions of self" (Hayden 85). Parvati is sold to a brothel at the tender age of twelve by her father to meet her mother's medical expenses, feed her little brothers and keep their cow, where she learns to identify herself as a whore. Her brutal treatment at her new house by her husband Rajesh, and then by Praful at his stairwell, makes her identify herself with trash. She sees herself as a fallen woman, a burden and a mess. Her conception of her own identity is negative and distorted. After she leaves the cruel places that caused her misery, she begins to learn to identify herself as human being who has been more sinned against than has sinned. When life forces her into a brothel similar the old one, her new identity is at threat. She longs to escape it because it reawakens a sense of worthlessness and threatens her self-identity. Her sense of worth is restored once she starts spending her days with Bhima at the slum which makes her forget her former place-identity.



### Changing Places and Unchanging Place-Identities

Life is automatically shaped by the place one lives in to a great extent. Place and identity “are co-produced as people come to identify with where they live . . . are in turn shaped by their environments, creating distinctive environmental autobiographies, the narratives we hold from the memories of those spaces and places that shaped us” (Giesekeing et al. 73). This is where Bhima’s fear stems from. Her environmental autobiography records memories associated with the Dubashes’ house, the house that shaped her after her husband’s departure with her little son and the death of her daughter and son-in-law and gave her the identity of a rich woman’s servant. The severely adverse slum which she believes to be a small part of her past threatens her place-identity. An eerie consciousness of a place she refuses to accept as home or a significant part of her autobiography, as the place that will make in the future, poses threat to her confidence and self-esteem.

### Footprints of Places

Places offer a “cluster of cognitive components” (Proshansky et al. 78) to people. The village, the Dubashes’ house and the slum give Bhima a cluster that becomes an “ever-present background” (79) and influences her. Her gentleness, sophisticated perception of the world, as well as her resilience result come from it.

Every “individual is characterized by not one role or social attribute but a number of them at any point during the entire lifecycle” (81). Parvati gains her values from the brothel, the apartment stairwell and then, the streets she roams. Her bitter life gives her a bitter yet bold and sensible nature, causing her to spurt words sharp as swords as often as she breathes.

Place-identity is independent of time and space. The events of life and the mental space that places afford determine what an individual’s mind would select to engage with. It continues to influence them even after the place is physically not a part of their life. The lived-space that shapes one’s identity becomes an unerasable memory when they move or the place undergoes changes because place-identity has:

*. . . endless variety of cognitions related to the past, present, and anticipated physical*

*settings that define and circumscribe the day-to-day existence of the person. These cognitions are evolved through the person’s selective engagement with his or her environment on both a conscious and unconscious level. But there is also the process by which the experience of a physical setting moves from the stage of ‘now going on’ to the stage of ‘being remembered’.* (Proshansky et al. 77).

Bhima’s understanding of herself, the people around her and, her responses, are shaped by the past at her village and mostly the Dubashes’ house; the present, at Sunita and Mrs. Motorcyclewalla’s houses and the slum, and, an unknown future, which she optimistic about. She picks the optimism consciously from the new places unlike the scepticism which invaded her without her knowledge. Parvati’s identity is shaped by her past at the village, the brothel, Rajesh’s apartment and Praful’s stairwell; the present at Tejpal Mahal, a new brothel that provides her shelter and, the market and, the homelessness she anticipates to suffer in the future. The places they left behind continue to influence the women as much as the places they presently live in. Parvati’s rudeness and pessimism and Bhima’s optimism combined with fear are impacts of the places from their past, present and anticipated future.

Bhima’s place-identity at Sera’s house contributes to the completion of her self-identity as a servant. Her self-consciousness is shaped by what Hegel calls a “master-slave dialectic”. “Place-identity cognitions express and reflect the physical settings . . . and are directly relevant to the social roles and attributes that define who the person is, how he or she is to behave, and what he or she is worth” (Proshansky et al. 81). The rich house she works for, her own house at the slum and, her subservient role, make her an inferior in the society. She loses this identity at Sunita’s house after the dialectic changes in Chitra’s hands, leading to a development in her self-identity.

### Urban-Identity

Dolores Hayden, an architectural historian, says, “People’s experiences of the urban landscape intertwine the sense of place and the politics of space” (71). The urban poor are forced into isolated areas and are restricted from the urban life. Of the



new mall built at the cost of the livelihood of poor fishmongers, which is “the pride and joy” (Umrigar 183) of the neighbourhood, Rajeev says to Bhima, “Such places are not meant for people like us” (115). The city oppresses them, causes misery and, gives them a subordinate identity. Parvati realises that the city will continue to “consume its poor, parasitic residents” (88) as it has always done.

So much of the quality of a place goes into one’s personality. The unsympathetic city and its slum equally shape Bhima’s identity significantly though she fails to realise it. The slum teaches her to live on minimum space and comforts because “the biological nature of human beings imposes minimal requirements on the use of a space (e.g., light, heat, oxygen, etc.)” (Proshansky et al. 80). The city teaches her strive to live and not just survive. It teaches her to identify herself as a “successful businesswoman” (Umrigar 253) after her business flourishes and she renovates her house to make it comfortable like the rest in the city. The miserable Tejpal mahal teaches Parvati to belittle herself. She loses her former identity once she realises that the places that ruined her are lost. She understands her worth and seeks simple pleasures after moving into Bhima’s place. The city teaches Maya to identify herself with her valuable dreams.

Bhima, Parvati and all the other characters have an identity that is unique and admirable. The different places they engage with, no matter how positive or negative, contribute significantly to their cognition and identity. Each character’s self-identity is a unique puzzle with the pieces contributed by their places and society and put together by their mind. Places give people give places their identity and people give places their identity. Through Bhima and Maya, the author gives the slum a better identity.

## Conclusion

Umrigar’s novel reveals that places are much more than physical settings. They control the “settings” of the mind. They have inherent qualities that define the self and are infiltrated by the belief-system of the society which does not permit a definition of

the self outside its terms. They shape the character, perspectives and identity by influencing lifestyle and determining one’s place in a society. They have the potential to suppress and liberate. They are embedded in one’s autobiography. Places pen, structure and restructure the narrative of lives of people and vice versa. They serve as signifiers of the character of its residents in some cases. Loss of the place shaping one’s identity leads to a loss of identity. Identity is shifting but the place-identity still leaves a mark. Every significant place in an individual’s life leaves an unerasable trace. Thus, different places create and contribute unique identities to the world.

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