



## Think India (Quarterly Journal)

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ONE DAY NATIONAL SEMINAR

ON

DISABILITY, REPRESENTATION AND LITERATURE

held on 03 October 2019 and Organised by P.G. & Research Department  
of English

S. T. HINDU COLLEGE, NAGERCOIL-2, Tamilnadu, India



### Role of Disabilities in Culture and Relationships as exposed in Thrity

#### Umrigar's *The Story Time*

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Disability is a matter of perception. Today cultural disability and human disabilities are the two most important issues, because world has become small and most of the people have migrated to different parts of the country for their survival or due to compulsion. Culture has a very strong hold on every person, sometime to the greater extent that culture determines the survival of 'self'. Most of the time relationships are affected by the cultural disabilities: cultural clashes and cultural intolerance, which provoke the human disabilities and relationship imbalance or breakup. Thrity Umrigar through her works has projected the complication of the cultural and human disabilities through her works. This article explore these concepts of disabilities of culture and relationship with reference to Thrity Umrigar's *The Story Hour* and project the view how human spirit and inborn culture can break all disabilities and enable strong relationships.

The term "Disability" is mostly related to a physical or mental problem that prevents a person's senses, movements and normal growth activities. Disability is a multifaceted term that can be related to any field apart from the physical and mental problem. Disability can be temporary or permanent or momentary. Disability is a matter of perception. As World Health Organization defines "Disability is thus not just a health problem. It is a complex phenomenon



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reflecting the interaction between features of a person's body and features of the society in which he or she lives".

Nothing in this world stands single: as a coin owns two sides a head and a tail everything in the universe is a combination of contradictions. An individual's life is no exception of it: as one's life is determined by love/hate, good/bad, success/failure, and society/self. Society and 'self' is molded by culture. Culture has a very strong hold on every person, sometime to the greater extent that culture determines the survival of self.

Culture enhances the quality of life and it increases the wellbeing of both the individual and the community. It acts as an important element to mold an individual as 'self' and a social being. Culture can be divided into two sections: inborn culture and culture acquired by birth. Inborn culture is the natural human behavior or characters such as love, care, empathy, ego, sympathy and feeling of oneness towards the nature and universe without restricted by any outside forces. Culture by birth is the belief, customs and traditions one obtain by the nation, family, caste, religion, and society they belong to by birth. Be it inborn or by birth, culture helps, teaches and moulds the individual to survive and succeed.

No human is an island. Being a social animal, consciously or unconsciously, every individual gets attached to one another. Today everyone have to come across both formal and informal relationships. Intimate relationships are restricted as relationship plays a major role in the growth or fall of an individual. Intimate relationships invoke physical or emotional intimacy with another, so it mostly involves family members and friends. It is the human nature to have a sense of belonging, to have a sense of satisfaction of being possessed and to have a sense of being secured in love, which is usually attained in intimate relationships.

Intimate relationship is the combination of both emotional and physical intimacy where the ratio of these intimacies varies according to the relationship (e.g., father-daughter; husband-wife). Some relations are more bonded with emotional intimacy then physical (father-daughter) and in some other ratio of physical intimacy is high when compared with other



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relationships (husband -wife). So the meaning and level of intimacy vary within and between relationships.

In a social relationship or any other intimate relationship other than family, may it be friends, acquaintances, or any relation due to professional- or survival-oriented relation, culture plays an important role. Today many relationships are acquired due to social communication and personal need. It may be a maid-mistress relation, doctor-patient relation, or teacher-student relation, which need not be intimate but by long run it can be committed as an intimate relationship. Disability of relationship can pop up easily in such relations when both the people who belong to different cultures.

Every relationship has their own restrictions and limitation, when the intimacy crosses the limitation which clashes with each other's culture, there begins the relation imbalance. This cultural disability breaks the bond of relationship, and this act provokes and exhibits human disabilities. Human disability can be exposed physically (shivering, trembling) and emotionally (stress, depression). Human disabilities can be caused by cultural disabilities that are created due to cross cultural or multicultural clashes leading to cultural conflicts. Human disabilities is cause of emotional or physical conflict that is caused by imbalanced and indecisive nature, and by struggle between 'self' and culture.

Disabilities of any kind are mostly focused in a negative way. But disabilities are just small obstacles that can be easily handled and be used as a stepping stone for success. Most of literary authors have proved this concept by their writings. Literature speaks better in all forms. Contemporary writers are much aware of the disabilities that are affecting the survival of human and they have provided many ways to explore and get through such barriers in their works. Cultural disability is one of the most important issues, because world has become small and most of the people have migrated to different parts of the country for their survival or due to compulsion. So Diasporic writings are more culture and relationship based as it deals with and dealt by a diasporic person, and it is where many people undergo cross cultural disabilities leading to human disabilities: alienation, depression, search and loss of identity, suicides,



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loneliness, and loss. Most of the diasporic authors have published most of their work exploring these disabilities as a stepping stone for survival. Thrity Umrigar is not an exception.

Thrity Umrigar had succeeded as the best-selling author of six novels *Bombay Time* (2001), *The Space Between Us* (2006), *If Today Be Sweet* (2007), *The Weight of Heaven* (2009), *The World We Found* (2012), *The Story Hour* (2014), *Everybody's Son: A Novel* (2017), *When I Carried You in My Belly* (2017) and *The Secret Between Us* (2018). She is also the author of the memoir, *First Darling of the Morning* (2004). Her books have been translated into several languages and published in over fifteen countries.

Thrity Umrigar was born in Bombay, India and came to the U.S. when she was 21. As a Parsi child attending a Catholic school in a predominantly Hindu country, she had the kind of schizophrenic and cosmopolitan childhood that has served her well in her life as a writer. She is the Armington Professor of English at Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland.

Thrity says “she started exploring and creating character from life, to have a better understanding of self”. She by exposing her with the people similar to her characters in reality and by witnessing all challenges faced by human in moral, ethical, economical and medical issues and how they come close to their breaking point and then rise to the occasion again sustained only by love, trust belief and hold in themselves is an awe-inspiring experiences, which Thrity has always tried to express through her stories. Thrity says:

What matters most to me is the human heart that beats at the center of all great stories. When I look back on my writing life, I see that the vehicles may be different — poems, short stories, newspaper, articles, novels — but the passengers remain the same. The passengers are always grappling with the darkness and trying to find the light; they are often inchoate and inarticulate but fumbling toward greater human communication; and they are almost always held together by that shaft of grace that we call love. (*If Today be Sweet*, 5)

Thrity's *The Story Hour* is a “compassionate and memorable novel is remarkable for the depth and complexity of its characters” (publisher weekly). Thrity has beautifully presented a



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relationship of two dissimilar women, how their relationship survives beyond all disabilities of culture and self, when their trust was shattered and friendship and care they had for each other broke. *The Story Hour* is a profound novel about relationships, cultures, disabilities and abilities.

Thrity's *The Story Hour* explores the lives of two migrated women Maggie, an educated, upper middle class African American woman, married to an educated and wealthy Indian, Sudhir; and Lakshmi, a working class Indian woman who shifted to United States after her marriage and is under the tight control of her husband, Adit Patil. Maggie, a Psychologist, first meets Lakshmi Patil when she was asked to conduct a psychiatric evaluation at the hospital as Lakshmi has tried to kill herself.

Relationship of these two women begins with lot of cultural disabilities of Maggie and human disability of Lakshmi. Relationship of Maggie and Lakshmi was expected to be professional relationship between a doctor and patient. There was nothing common between both except their gender and both were immigrants. As an experienced Psychologist, Maggie carefully maintained emotional distance from her patients. Culture and class play an important role more than mere relationship. Maggie first suspected that her boss has asked her to take the case because Maggie's husband is an Indian, but quickly she discovers that the class difference between her and Lakshmi outweighed any similarity or oneness between them.

Lakshmi is exposed as a character with human disability, who in her hyper depression had taken her life to risk. Lakshmi who comes from a small village, and speaks broken English, is prejudiced with her thought about 'Blacks' i.e. Maggie. Lakshmi says, "I remember what the husband say: The black will smile sweet like a baby before he stab you and steal your money. That is why she talking about helping me and all." (*The Story Hour*, 20). Both the characters are haunted by the cultural disability just by the face value.

Later when Maggie understands that Lakshmi was treated as an unpaid servant in her husband's grocery and restaurant and has no friends and her husband treats her with disdain. Maggie feels empathy towards her and her professional detachment disintegrates. Meanwhile Lakshmi comes out of her prejudice about black people and starts to open up to Maggie. Maggie



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learns that Lakshmi was desperately lonely, as she had totally cut off from her family in India and trapped in loveless marriage to a heartless man who limits her world to small restaurant and grocery store while Maggie and Sudhir seem to have a perfect marriage.

When the bond of relationship bloom the cultural disabilities and clashes vanishes. It is the inborn culture that has an optimistic bond in the magical relationships other than family bonds. Family bonds are bound by blood, but the empathy of one human for the other disabled person has more healing power than any medication. Maggie breaks her limitations and helps Lakshmi in her survival. Maggie agrees to treat her for nothing as she was so much concerned that she should not reattempt suicide. Soon Lakshmi was making weekly bus trips to Maggie's home office. Lakshmi, misunderstanding Maggie's kindness, begins to think of the psychiatrist as her friend. Though Maggie wanted to explain their relation was not intimate as she felt Lakshmi getting hurt when she tries to explain it. Later she realized Lakshmi's need was not counseling but a friend.

Maggie was not much shocked when Lakshmi brought hot homemade food as a gratitude for treating her at home. Maggie realized "she should've known. Had she ever met an Indian who could accept a favor without needing to repay it immediately? Or who could resist the urge to feed another person?" Being married to Indian and aware of the culture of Indians Maggie had to tolerate and accept the food bought by Lakshmi. The bond of friendship begins to grow beyond all disabilities. Maggie determined to empower Lakshmi as a woman who feels valued in her own rights. Maggie and Sudhir hire Lakshmi to cook and clean for them and recommend her to their friends. Maggie abandons all protocols as a doctor towards Lakshmi even though they have nothing in common except that both women were haunted by loss and truths they were afraid to reveal.

Though the bond of friendship was healthy and determined the growth of both the women, there were some cultural clashes and human disabilities that were haunting both. Lakshmi attempted to kill herself because she was attracted to regular customer named Bobby. Though there was no mutual physical or emotional bonding Lakshmi misunderstood the



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sympathy of Bobby towards her as love. She was depressed by the thought that she has cheated her husband by having a liking for Bobby. On the other hand Maggie who have physical affair with Peter a white man, had not much guilt until Lakshmi open up the reason for her attempt of suicide. Both the women, be them educated or uneducated, Indian or western, Christian or Hindu, they were vulnerable to their human disability be it emotional or physical. Both of them have crossed their marital customs and their bond with their husband.

Both Lakshmi and Maggie belong to two different cultures. Taboos in one culture need not be a taboo in another. Indian culture has a different customs for married women, which is not in other culture. When Maggie questions Lakshmi if she has made a mistake with Bobby? Lakshmi's reaction make Maggie get irritated towards herself: "No, madam. I told you. I married women. I's from good family" (62). Lakshmi's transformation as an empowered woman changes her love bonding with Adit. They share a beautiful relationship and Adit gives her freedom to get connected to her home, her siblings and her father. This transformation happens after Lakshmi outbreak to Maggie how she cheated the man Adit who was supposed to marry her sister. She was forced to the situation as her sister Shilpa was in love with another guy and to save her father's and family respect. Adit was ready to forgive and accept Lakshmi when she openly expresses her pain and stress about her past act.

Human disabilities and cultural disabilities are two disabilities that can be break or strengthen a person. Lakshmi's human disabilities were meditated by Maggie's love and friendship that was more powerful than cultural disabilities and restriction. But when Lakshmi found the affair of Maggie with Peter, she was not giving a chance to Maggie's friendship bond. She was worried about an Indian brother bond with Sudhir. So without knowing the pros and cons she indirectly informed Sudhir about the affair. This very act of Lakshmi breaks both the bond of friendship between Maggie and herself and has shattered the beautiful marriage life of Sudhir and Maggie.

Lakshmi's momentary inborn culture vanishes and brings out the culture variation between Maggie and Self. It is the cultural disability that provokes Lakshmi to act cunningly.



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Lakshmi had no idea how it would break the beautiful relationship and she was punishing Sudhir more than Maggie. Human Disability has same effect on all human without any discrepancies based on culture and belief.

In relationships, it is the act of every person that determines the success and failure of another bond. Maggie and Sudhir have empowered Lakshmi and have made her love life a heaven but on the contrary, Lakshmi's act out of human disability has shattered the life of Sudhir and Maggie. When Lakshmi was aware about the degrading life of Sudhir after their partition she takes up the responsibility to rectify her mistake. Unlearned village girl Lakshmi, flews miles to meet Maggie to get her forgiveness and to help her and Self to come out of their disabilities.

Maggie who was unaware that it was Lakshmi who have travelled so far just to get back her friendship and give her back her love life; empathetically run to help a woman in dismay. Lakshmi in process of finding Maggie's home get immersed in the cold sea water. Though Maggie became aware it was Lakshmi when she comes closer to help her she was unable to avoid or give up her in stressful situation. Though she was full of hatred and dislike for Lakshmi, she takes her home and gives her warmth and comfort. With all human disabilities and cultural disabilities, they both share a coffee and once again Lakshmi begins to share her love and regrets.

Culture and relationships have their own abilities and disabilities. It is how a person approaches each disability. Be it a cultural imbalance leading to human disability, it is the inborn culture of every one to love and let love; forgive and forget; live and let live. Human disabilities are only hidden ability that can be brought out by inborn cultural abilities. Thrity Umrigar the optimistic writer has projected this view in the beautiful novel *The Story Hour*. To conclude with a quote "the human spirit is one of ability, perseverance, and courage that no disability can steal away". (Unknown)

### Reference

Thrity Umrigar (2014) *The Story Hour*. HarperCollins Publisher: Newyork. Inprint.



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