

Globalization & Textures Of India

"The Weight of Heaven" by Thrity Umrigar Harper Perennial 365 Pages Paperback

REVIEWED BY MAHADEV DESAI

The acclaimed author of the bestselling novels *The Space Between Us*; *If Today Be Sweet*; and the powerful and poignant memoir *First Darling of May*; Thrity Umrigar has written yet another powerful new novel, *The Weight of Heaven*. The novel has generated profuse praise from both literary critics and readers alike.

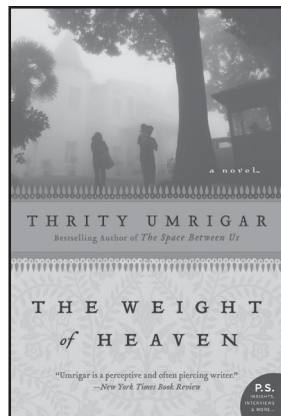
To quote some of the laudatory reviews:-"Umrigar is a perceptive and often piercing writer" New York Times Review.

"The landscape and culture... (are) evocatively depicted... And such drama!... We're pulled along by the intensity of this sweeping cinematic story."-Elle." Powerful... Twisty, brimming with dark humor and keen moral insight, the Weight of Heaven packs a wallop on both literary and emotional level... Umrigar, a journalist for the Boston Globe, is a descriptive master." Christian Science Monitor.

An educated and liberal American couple Frank and Ellie, living in Michigan lose their only son, seven year old Benny, to a sudden illness. Frank blames Ellie for Benny's death. Both are devastated by Benny's death and find their marriage crumbling. Thinking that a move away from home would help re-unite and heal them, Frank agrees to manage a factory, Herbal Solutions in a seaside village Girbaug in India. The Company he works for has leased thousands of acres of forest land with trees with medicinal properties. The factory processes the leaves for diabetic medicine. The villagers resent this intrusion because these trees are lifeblood to them—they brew, chew and even smoke the leaves and chop the trees for firewood.

Frank feels like an outsider here. He has to contend with class and cultural divide and feels confused and cynical. He finds his employees obsequious, fawning, lazy, incompetent and lacking in initiative. The death of a trade union activist in prison and suicide of a villager whose livelihood depended on the

trees now owned by the company exacerbates Frank's problems. He still misses Benny, till a nine year old Ramesh, son of his cook and maid, Prakash and his Christian wife Edna, enters into his life. Ramesh is funny, curious, smart and full of charm, Frank pays his school fees; helps him with his studies; plays basket ball with him; and takes him to the beach.



Unlike Frank, Ellie adapts easily to India and its culture. A therapist, she volunteers at her friend Nandita's Niral Health Clinic and school, and is well liked and respected by the village folk. While Frank tries to spend more time with Ramesh, Prakash and Edna feel sidelined. Prakash feels helpless, as he is illiterate, poor and alcoholic. Edna is a conflicted woman, "caught between the desires of her own heart, and an overpowering, almost maternal need to mother her husband and protect him from his own demons." She also wants the best for Ramesh.

Frank and Ellie take Ramesh to Bombay. Ramesh is awe-struck by the opulence of the Taj Hotel. Ramesh also gets a taste of Christmas celebrations in Frank's home, where Frank gives him a new computer. Prakash resents all this affection shown to his son and in a fit of rage snips the wires of the computer and disables it. Later, to pacify Ramesh, he decides to take him to Goa to meet his grandparents. While they are away, Frank who is obsessed with Ramesh, panics and fearing that he might lose Ramesh for ever, hatches a plot to take Ramesh to America. But events take unexpected turns at the end.

The novel has rich prose and a fast-paced plot where the author delves deeply into the inner struggles of her finely etched characters as well as the impact of globalization on a small village community in India. In this riveting novel, she illuminates the human heart in all its longing and imperfection and also brilliantly captures the texture of India.

India-born Thrity Umrigar is a prolific journalist for over 17 years and associate professor of English at Case Western Reserve University. She has a Ph.D. in English and lives in Cleveland.

Masala Chai: Exploring India's Socio-political Issues

BY VICTORIA WHITE

Vijay and Bharti are in love. But this is not just another love story. The author has so deftly woven the socio-political issues of modern-day India into his tale of young love that the themes of corruption in high office and social justice are not relegated to mere backdrop but intrinsically part of the lives of his two protagonists. Creating Vijay and Bharti as two highly educated, socially aware and actively engaged instigators of social justice is cleverly done, because events just don't happen to them; they are part of the overall theme and message. The many dialogues that take place between the parents, family and



friends all breathe life into the political and social matters that underpin the main storyline. And it's in the dialogues of his characters as they discuss the events and issues impacting their lives where the author's knowledge and passion really shine, making Masala Chai an informative read for anyone who wants to know what is going on in India today.

And, as with many of my wonderful authors and clients, Vinod is altruistic and charitably minded. He hopes to financially help the poor of India with the royalties from the sale of his book. Visit his Masala Chai book site to learn more about the book and the author site www.vinodluthra.com.

'Once Upon A Time...' Throwback To Gangsterism In Mumbai

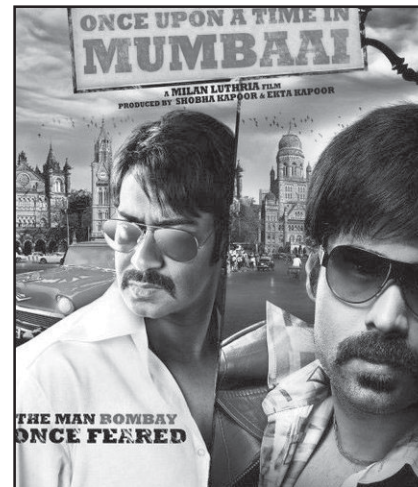
*Film: "Once Upon A Time In Mumbaai"; Starring: Ajay Devgn, Emraan Hashmi, Randeep Hooda, Kangna Ranaut, Prachi Desai; Directed by: Milan Luthria; Rating: *** 1/2*

BY SUBHASH K. JHA

It's the way he looks at the camera. Almost as if it doesn't exist. Ajay Devgn as Sultan Mirza is NOT Haji Mastan, please note. He's just this Robin Hood in the 1970s who happened to be a smuggler and who at some point in the taut plot, locks horns with a junior recruit who, please note, is NOT Dawood Ibrahim.

So who, in the name of immoral crime and haphazard policing, are these two men? So stylishly masculine, so sweaty in their realism and so menacing in their demeanor and complete denial of the existent morality they remind you of the anti-social heroes from Sam Peckinpah's *West-erns*?

"Once Upon A Time In Mumbaai" takes us back to the beginnings of gangsterism in Mumbai. Milan Luthria excels in creating smouldering combustible stress between two mean menacing men... Remember Devgn (who back then was Devgan, just as Mumbai



was Bombay when the film under review unfolds) and Saif Ali Khan in Luthria's "Kachche Dhaage" and

"Once Upon A Time In Mumbaai" takes us back to the beginnings of gangsterism in Mumbai. Milan Luthria excels in creating smouldering combustible stress between two mean menacing men...

on a more satirical note, John Abraham and Nana Patekar in "Taxi No 9211".

In "Once Upon A Time..." the conflict between Devgn (who is NOT Haji Mastan) and Emraan Hashmi (who is NOT Dawood) is placed in a far more complex and challenging scenario. The screenplay (Rajat Arora) takes into view the entire gamut of grime in the canvas of crime that cannot be hidden by the surface glamour and glitter.

The vintage cars, the costumes and that attitude of rebellious abandon comes through in the inner and outer styling of the characters. The people in Luthria's panoramic view of Mumbai in the late 1960s and 70s are steeped in a cinematic realism. Neither a part of that period nor a completely true representation of an era gone-bye-bye the characters hover in a no-man's-land populated by fascinating details of past recreated with a tongue-in-cheek broadness of purpose.

There are bouts of suppressed satire in the way the whole era of the genesis of the underworld is represented. For example Emraan Hashmi befriends and sleeps with a woman who looks a lot like a Bollywood actress whom Raj Kapoor had introduced in a film and Dawood had befriended

and allegedly impregnated.

Often the characters are an amalgamation of furious folklore and long-forgotten newspaper headlines of the 1970s. Kangna Ranaut plays an actress from the 1970s who gets the hots for the Robin Hood-styled smuggler-hero. Later she is discovered to have a congenital heart disease (a la Madhubala who came two decades before the events of this film are supposed to unfold). But look at the irony! It's her smuggler-hero lover who dies of a wounded heart.

Maybe we shouldn't give away the plot. Because the plot never gives itself away. It never betrays a phoney intent of purpose. The narrative unfolds through the first-person narration of a troubled wounded cop, played with remarkably restrained bravado by Randeep Hooda. Indeed this is the most accomplished performance in the film. He's partly a gallant law enforcer and partly a victim of a system that breeds inequality, corruption and finally, self-de-

struction.

Hooda is wry, cynical, bitter, anguished and yet able to see the humor of a situation that one can ride only by sublimating its gravity. As for Ajay Devgn, he continues to evolve with every performance. As a gangster from the 1970s Devgn brings on the table a clenched self-mocking immorality. He stands outside the character even while internalizing the performance.

Director Milan Luthria imparts a keen eye for details to the storytelling. Some bits in the second-half get shaky, such as the predictable club songs and the repeated use of overlapping editing patterns to convey the rising tension between the mentor and the protégé turned tormenter. But the director's command over the language of outlawry is unquestionable.

Emraan Hashmi as Devgn's uncontrollable protégée gets the look and body language right. His courtship of Prachi Desai to the accompaniment of romantic hits from the 1970s (e.g Raj Kapoor's "Bobby") is engaging.

Understandably, the two ladies are reduced to pursing their lips and wringing their hands as the story progresses. The film's best, most charming and heartwarming moments come in the early stages of the drama between Devgn and Ranaut. Their growing fondness for one another is recorded in scenes and words written by a poet who can see the humor behind mutual attractions.

The real hero of this film is the writing. Rajat Arora's dialogues flow from the storytelling in a smooth flow of poetry and street wisdom. Aseem Mishra's sharply evocative cinematography gives to this rugged-and-razorsharp look at Mumbai's mythic mating with crime, an urgency that simply can't be ignored.