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# KARTIKA REVIEW

## MEDITATIONS ON “HOME”



**THRITY UMRIGAR**

I have two contrary impulses that I have tried to reconcile most of my life. Mostly unsuccessfully.

On the one hand, I am one of those silly people who wants to live permanently in almost any place that I visit. Even before I've spent a full day in a new town or country, I see myself living there, writing my books, making new friends, building a new life. It is alarming how easily I can imagine myself in new situations and places, how effortlessly the nesting instinct takes over, the alacrity with which I can make myself at home in the world.

On the other hand, home is wherever I'm not. I am a mongrel, a malcontent, forever seeing over the horizon to a distant shore. In that sense, I am a true immigrant. Unease and restlessness are built into my bones and I find myself longing for the places I have left behind. When I am in the United States, I find myself missing and defending the warmth and bustle of life in India. I speak longingly of the crowded streets, the lack of alienation, the involvement in each other's lives, the friends who visit without calling first, the neighbors who keep an eye out for each other.

But when I am in India, those same customs and people, the gossip and the inquisitiveness, the constant scrutiny and gaze, the busybodyness, drive me

crazy. I find myself longing for the coolness of America—the wide open spaces, the privacy, the stillness and quiet, the freedom to be solitary. The absence of people who heap quantities of food into your plate without asking, who tell you to *eat, eat, eat*, who ask the most personal questions without batting an eye, who give you unsolicited advice on matters medical, legal, political and intimate.

But then I'm back in America and the evening streets seem too empty and lifeless and the malls and shopping arcades seem shallow and soulless and America itself feels too clean and sanitized and unnatural. And the conviction builds that this is not real life, that life is meant to be soulful and dirty and messy and crazy-making. And so the cycle begins anew.

My ideal 'home,' I suppose, would be some combination of involvement and privacy, closeness and distance, love, but not the smothering kind. That is the ideal I carry in my head and have, with some success, managed to bring into my life. It is a good life that I have built, I know this, but somehow it pales in comparison to the power of my dreams.

In my dreams, I gather all the people that I love under one roof and we live happily together without quarrel or misunderstanding. There are communal meals, big, boisterous affairs, with much drinking and talking and joking. But when someone goes to place more food on my plate and I shake my head no, they listen.



**Thrity Umrigar** is an Indian-American writer, who was born in Mumbai and immigrated to the United States when she was 21. She is a journalist and the author of the novels *Bombay Time*, *The Space Between Us*, *First Darling of the Morning*, *If Today Be Sweet*, and *The Weight of Heaven*. She has written for the *Washington Post*, *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, among other newspapers, and regularly writes for *The Boston Globe's* book pages. She is currently assistant professor of English at Case Western Reserve University where she teaches creative writing and literature. She was a winner of the Nieman Fellowship to Harvard University. She has a Ph.D. in English and presently lives in Cleveland, Ohio.