



EXPATRIATE EXPERIENCE VERSUS CULTURAL DIVERSITY IN BAPSI SIDHWA'S *AN AMERICAN BRAT*

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ABSTRACT

Bapsi Sidhwa the most acclaimed English novelist of Pakistan has been the pioneer of bringing the Parsi religion into light and making the rest of the world well aware of it. Most of her fictional characters are Parsi or the exploited women. In her novel An American Brat Sidhwa focuses on a Parsi girl who comes under the process of modernization just after her arrival on American land. Sidhwa draws the real picture of a Parsi-Pakistani family bound to follow the Zoroastrian tenets strictly, especially when a Parsi girl or boy tries to crack the shackles of their religion. What happens when a conservative girl is sent to America to get modernised, how a Parsi family reacts when the modern brat tries to break the age-long-old traditional taboos by making plan for inter-caste marriage, and how she is dissuaded from her decision to go down the aisle with a non-Parsi, Sidhwa has dealt this complex and religio-sensitive theme with great acumen. Sidhwa being a diasporic writer himself better utilises her immigrant experience while portraying the story of An American Brat.

Key Words: Culture, Expatriation, Modernization, Zoroastrianism and Marriage.

INTRODUCTION

An American Brat is a tale of a Parsi Zoroastrian teen-aged girl Feroza Ginwalla whose growing shyness and traditional outlook forces her parents Cyrus and Zareen Ginwalla to take decision to send her to America for three-month holiday, so that she might get her ways amended, and might acquire a modern look, as Zareen says: "Travel will broaden her outlook, get this puritanical rubbish out of her head" (*American Brat* 14). Feroza's parents are well acquainted with the value of modernity and the result of a foreign (especially western) tour; that's why, when Zareen expresses her concern to Cyrus that Feroza is ". . . becoming more and more backward every day" (*American Brat* 9); he agrees to send Feroza to

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America; at this crucial time of decision, her brother Manek, the experienced expatriate, would have been in the mind of both of them, probably. Through Cyrus and Zareen's discussion, Sidhwa raises questions on the contemporary tradition of Pakistan:

When I was her age, I wore frocks and cycled to Kinnaird College. And that was in '59 and '60—fifteen years after partition! Can she wear frocks? No. Women mustn't show their legs, women shouldn't dress like this, and women shouldn't act like that. Girls mustn't play hockey or sing or dance! If everything corrupts their pious little minds so easily, then the mullahs should wear burqas and stay within the four walls of their houses! (American Brat 10)

Rising fundamentalist factors, such as, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's growing popularity, martial law of General Zia, and religion influencing every aspect of day-to-day life, were being noticed by Cyrus and Zareen, and they were trying not to let the girl affected with them; among these issues, religion was not being ignored; only a week earlier, Cyrus had seen Feroza talking to an unknown youth in the sitting room, and he feared his susceptible daughter might fall in love with and marry a non-Parsi; that's why, this traditional girl, who has not yet gone abroad, rejects the handsome boy: "I'm sorry, I don't think I'll be able to act in the play. You know how it is—my father won't like it. Please don't come again. Don't phone, please" (*American Brat* 16). Cyrus knew that marriage outside the community could ban the girl from community matters and bar her from her faith:

. . . Cyrus had noticed Feroza's reaction to the husky youth. Although she was a year younger than Zareen was when she married Cyrus, Feroza seemed, somehow, more sexually ripe. What with the onslaught of television and the American and British videos, it was hard to keep young girls as innocent as one might wish. Despite all their careful indoctrination—Zareen's, her grandmothers', her aunts'—it would not be as easy to keep Feroza out of harm's way as they had presumed when, in keeping with the times, they had decided to let Feroza graduate before getting her married. (American Brat 17-18)

In America she stays with her maternal uncle Manek, only six year older to her, who is a doctoral candidate at Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). In the novel Sidhwa beautifully portrays America's essence from the view-point of a visitor, who comes here for the first time. Her uncle has been depicted throughout the book as a guide. Though, she goes to America on a three month tour, yet she returns after a long period of three years, and that too only for a short period; fascinated by the charms of freer society, Feroza decides to get



settled as a student of hotel management at a junior college in Twin Falls, Idaho; along the way, she makes friends of all kinds, and learns all about relationships, good and bad. Meanwhile, Manek goes back to Pakistan to get wedded to a good Parsi girl; at the same time, Feroza's best friend-cum-roommate, Jo, brings her to his family in Denver; and under the spell of alluring life in a large city, both decide to migrate to the University of Denver; this transfer is followed by the first visit of Feroza to home. Her family is amazed to see a confident and frank Feroza; her grandmother, Khutlibai, beholds the vivid behavioural changes in the girl:

Her gaze lingered on Feroza's vibrant face, and her shrewd eyes were luminous with pride and love. She saw life and intelligence shining in her face, but there was too much life there, she thought with a trace of unease, too much intelligence—more than might be good for her granddaughter. (American Brat 235)

On her way back to America, she is gifted \$ 700 by her family; she is thrilled to make the most of the money to purchase a second hand car. But she falls in love with the man, David Press, whose vehicle she was going to purchase; her relationship with him blossoms; soon after it, her family gets a letter from Feroza informing that she is going to go down the aisle with a non-Parsi; hearing it, the family gets stormed, and by corollary, Zareen is dispatched immediately to foil the romance in order to save and secure the religious charity, as inter-community marriages are strictly prohibited in the Parsi religion; thus, the theme of marriage becomes the core-point of story, on which the story grows and prosper. In order to follow the Zoroastrian tenets, Zareen tries, by hook or crook, to dissuade Feroza from her decision to marry a non-Parsi, David Press; the last pages of the novel reflect the clash among different cultures that causes breakup between David, a Jew, and Feroza, a Parsi. The factor of modernity prevails and the Parsi girl who had been traditional in the previous part of the book, defies the matrimonial taboos, and resolves to settle for ever in America, with an expectation that she would seek a suitable man to get married with, no matter if he is a Parsi or not. Sidhwa gives a conclusive message that in contemporary context and conditions, old traditions and religious inhibitions have lost their importance and relevance from the modern perspective of youngsters who seek a freer society without any interference of their parents:

. . .the novel functions on two levels. The expatriate experience in which the novelist cleverly juxtaposes first and third world perceptions provides humour. At a serious level, the problem of inter-community marriage and adjustment of a migrant to a different culture is carefully and often ironically delineated. The deft handling of such modern themes by Bapsi Sidhwa makes her novel both complex and entertaining. (Kapadia 188)



At the university of Denver, on seeing the cosmopolitan variety of students—the black, Hispanic, Irani, Arabic, Indian and, the Pakistani— Feroza gets excited; the mingling of diversified cultural milieu provides her a new platform to proceed the function of getting a modern look; the more her social life blossoms, the more her expenses increase; she takes an idea of working in a bar in order to become a sales-person, waitress, and sell tickets at amusement park; now, Sidhwa fabricates another cultural contrast:

There were no waitresses in Pakistan, only waiters. Since there were no bars, there were no bartenders. Even had the jobs been available and the stigma attached to them had not existed, Feroza would have found working at these professions in Pakistan intolerable. Her slightest move would attract disproportionate attention and comment, for no other reason except that she was a young woman in a country where few young women were visible working. (American Brat 216)

V.L.V.N. Narendra Kumar comments that “in Bapsi Sidhwa’s fiction in general. . .there are several inter-textual references which not only enable her to register ‘cultural distance’ but also introduce the exotic to the western reader. This is one of the salient features of postcolonial fiction” (171).

To put conservative Feroza on the track of modernization, Sidhwa has shown her sharing room with different types of mates—the American girl Jo, Rhonda and Gwen, and the lesbians Laura and Shirley; thus, through the interaction with people of various cultures, she experiences different shades of life. Throughout her journey, from a old-fashioned girl to a modern brat, Feroza gains various experiences as an immigrant; though, sometimes her culture stumbles her way, yet, Manek, an expatriate-experienced Pakistani, helps her as a guide to overcome such sporadic problematic situations. Thus, a shy and backward girl of the Parsi heritage, after expatriation, gets a modern look leaving past the cultural inhibition and matrimonial sanctions:

. . .Bapsi Sidhwa’s fourth novel, An American Brat has two distinctive movements. Initially there is the movement towards self-actualization in the life of Feroza Ginwalla made possible by acculturation to the American way of thinking and life-styles. Later as Feroza achieves a synthesis between tradition and modernity, the theme of marriage is elaborately examined with reference to the Parsis’ attempt to maintain the status quo as regards the sanctity of their religion and continuity of their inherited cultural traditions. By providing insights and detailed information about the Parsis and their



culture Sidhwa attempts to foster a better understanding of her community and curbs possible prejudicial misconceptions of the Parsis. (Kapadia 198)

Sidhwa tries to show that in the modern way of life, traditional norms and religious taboos are going to lose their importance; in Feroza's context, gone are the days of *salwar-kamiz*, now she wears jeans and top, and has become an American brat instead of a fundamentalist and shy girl hailing from Pakistan:

. . .the last issue that is taken up in this book is that of the culture shock that an International student from the Third World experiences in the US. We start with a shy soft spoken salwar kameez clad girl whose mother thinks she is too conservative for her age. At the end of the book we encounter a self confident, and an independent girl who has no hang ups about her individuality or sexuality. Gone are the salwar kameezes which she might wear to feel ethnic, but they are largely substituted by jeans and sorts. This is, after all, a novel about various conflicts between, East and West, third world culture and the first world culture, India and Pakistan, Parsee and Muslim, young and old, conservative and progressive, mothers and daughters, the sacred and the profane, and even husbands and wives. (Singhal 150)

R. K. Dhawan and Novy Kapadia comment critically on the thematic texture of the novel:

*Sidhwa shows that ironically people get limited by the various religious teachings and cultural mores that shape us from infancy. It is Sidhwa's humour, irreverence, astute characterization and positive outlook which enable her tackle contemporary problems like fundamentalism, expatriate experience, cultural clashes and inter-faith marriages amongst the Parsis, with great aplomb in *An American Brat*. (25)*

Applauding author's wherewithal in describing the expatriate experience of the girl as well as religious and ethnic bias Zaman comments:

*Sidhwa is at her best when she uses her pen to describe the Parsi community or human prejudices and irrationality. In *An American Brat*, as well, Sidhwa is at her best when she describes the Parsi community in Lahore, the family get-togethers, the bickering, the alliances. Sidhwa is much less at ease in describing America. The American experience does, however, allow Sidhwa to expand her canvas. In each of her earlier books Sidhwa had included people*



from different ethnic and religious groups, often to question religious and ethnic prejudices. (204)

Thus, Bapsi Sidhwa has very aptly shown the mingling of three different cultures namely the Parsi, the Islamic, and the Western in her novel *An American Brat*; through the immigrant experience of a shy and fundamentalist character, Feroza, tradition (of Pakistan) and modernity (of America) are juxtaposed in a much successful manner. Western experience of the Eastern girl, her mother, uncle and his wife is also noteworthy to the foundation of the story. The use of East-West technique shows the acumen and better understanding of Sidhwa with such issues, as she herself has been a diasporic author; autobiographical element enriches the plot of the saga as well as presents a lively and realistic image of immigration and its problematic after-effects.

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