



THE CULTURAL SHOCK AND ITS IMPACT ON TRADITIONAL BELIEF SYSTEM: BAPSI SIDHWA'S *AN AMERICAN BRAT*

DR. A. P. KHAIRNAR

Principal and Research Guide
J. K. Shah Adarsh College
Nijampur-Jaitane, Dhule
(MS) INDIA

SAVITA SUBHASH AHIRRAO

Research Scholar
KBCNMU Jalgaon
(MS) INDIA

ABSTRACT

The world has become a global village. There is the impact of Globalization on literature. There are a number of outstanding writers from the Indian Subcontinent now settling in developed countries like USA and Britain. They depict their dual experiences through their writing. These authors tackle the issue of cultural differences and dilemmas of the east and the west through their writings. Bapsi Sidhwa is a renowned author from the east country who is now settled in America. Her novel An American Brat presents the cultural conflict between the east and the west countries. Sidhwa discusses how an individual from the Third World suffers in new environment and tries to adjust with new surrounding of the First World. The aim of this paper is to highlight the impact of dominating American culture on the belief system of people from the Indian Subcontinent. It is referred as the problem of cultural shock. Bapsi Sidhwa describes the cultural conflict not only on personal level but also on social level through the example of Feroza.

Keywords:- Cultural Shock, Globalization, Third World, First World, Tradition, Belief.

INTRODUCTION

Bapsi Sidhwa is a well-known South Asian novelist of the Parsee community. She starts her writing career at the age of twenty six. She is a prominent literary figure and an active social worker. She belongs to India, Pakistan and the United States simultaneously and she likes herself to be called as a Panjabi-Pakistani-Parsee woman. There are five novels to her credit.



These are *The Crow Eaters* (1980), *The Pakistani Bride* (1982), *Ice-Candy Man* (1988), *An American Brat* (1993) and *Water* (2006). She has been honoured with many international awards. Her novels have been published in many countries and translated into many other languages like French, Russian and Urdu. She moved to the USA in 1983 and settled down in Houston, Texas. Sidhwa's work has an autobiographical touch.

An American Brat is the most recent work of Bapsi Sidhwa that highlights author's first-hand experiences in foreign country like USA. Sidhwa nicely handles the issues of cultural clashes between the Zoroastrian community and the modern culture of America. Sidhwa and Bharti Mukherjee have lots of similarity with each other as both authors write about immigrant experiences of their protagonist from the novel. "Mukherjee is interested in writing the lives of Third World women who are liberated from the shackles of conservative patriarchal society" (Stephen 14). In the same way, Sidhwa portrays how the Parsee protagonist Feroza traps into the dilemma to choose the Parsee beliefs or to prefer the liberal culture of America. She describes the experience of an immigrant in the novel. In an Interview with Naila Hussain, Bapsi Sidhwa says,

"The book deals with the subject of 'cultural shock' young people from the subcontinent have to contend with when they choose to study abroad. It also delineates the clashes the divergent culture generate between the families 'back home' and their transformed and transgressing progeny bravely groping their way in the New World" (19).

Culture and religion play an important role for the stability of nation and society throughout history. It is very hard to define the word 'culture'. Culture is a complex term that includes one's knowledge, belief, dressing code, law, morals, customs, traditions and habits acquired by man as a member of the society. In general culture combines the traditions and customs of specific religion or community. Every country and community has their distinct culture and that has been followed throughout the ages. Cultural diversity is found all over the world. Bapsi Sidhwa in all her novels narrates the issue of cultural differences and the problems arising out of it.

An American Brat is the story of a young girl, Feroza. It presents her journey through three cultures-her own community's culture, her country Pakistan's Islamic culture and the Western culture of the United States of America. Feroza is a central character from the novel who belongs to an affluent Parsee family living in Lahore. The novel opens with Zareen's anxiety about her daughter who is becoming backward due to the influences of the Islamic fundamentalist views. Zareen describes the incident when she visited to the school of Feroza. She is disturbed because of her daughter's reaction on her wearing attire. Feroza says



“Mummy, please don’t come to school dressed like that.’ She objected to my sleeveless sari-blouse!” (Sidhwa, *An American Brat*. 10). Feroza objects the dressing style of her mother and firmly believes that Parsee women in Lahore should not dress differently. Zareen believes that their culture is different from Muslim culture which has narrow-minded attitude towards the issue of women. Feroza gives the glimpse of cultural difference at the very beginning of the novel. Author points out that each community has a different culture which affects one’s dressing style. Sidhwa focuses on the dressing culture of the Parsee woman that is modern one while Islamic woman prefers *Burkha*. This incident displays that different communities have different dressing style. Each individual can adopt attire according to his or her culture.

Feroza’s father has fear in his mind that his daughter may marry a Muslim boy. That is why he insults the boy who tries to persuade his daughter to play the role in the drama. The parents of Feroza think that their daughter might succumb to Islamic conservatism and may forget her Parsee traditions and beliefs. They decide to send their daughter on a holiday trip of America to change her outlook. They believe that the western life of USA is much similar to the Parsee way of life. Feroza is also highly excited about the decision.

Feroza’s geographical journey begins from the third world backward Pakistan to the first world liberal America. She is confused by the alien culture and lifestyle of America at the beginning. She shows her impatient nature when the customs officer is inspecting her luggage at the airport of America. She gets frustrated because of the bombarding of rude questions on her and the callous behavior of the inspector. Her uncle Manek comes and anyhow convinces the customs officer. In this way all the confusion is sorted out.

Feroza feels excited to see the glory and glamour of New York. Manek teaches her how to adjust at the new world. She also experiences the dark and drab side of New York with its full of nastiness and debris. Sidhwa depicts many incidents of cultural shock that is experienced by third world immigrants. She also portrays the difference between Parsee and American culture very minutely. Feroza has grown up in a conservative country like Pakistan that is why she avoids to change her dress in front of Jo who is her roommate. Jo is a bold girl and never bothers to change her clothes in front of Feroza. While Feroza is so conscious about her female body that she avoids altering dress in the presence of her roommate. She never tries short clothes at the beginning. Jo thinks that Feroza may have some problem with her leg. But Feroza replies, “It’s not decent to show legs in Pakistan” (Sidhwa, *An American Brat*. 151) In a conservative country like Pakistan, girls are asked to maintain privacy about their bodies. Even women are not allowed to express their feeling of sexuality openly. This reflects conservative attitude of Feroza.



Sidhwa represents the culture of America by taking the example of Jo who is a fine example of modern culture. Jo is an American girl who changes her boyfriend every week; it is very surprising to Feroza. She feels hesitant to attend the evening party with Jo at the beginning. Her nervousness vanishes with the first sweep of wine then she feels comfortable with boys. She learns how to speak in American way by using slang in the company of Jo. She starts drinking, driving, dancing and also smoking. Parsee people worship fire that is why smoking is forbidden by them. Feroza modifies herself to such extent that she does not hesitate to flirt with boys. Sometimes she feels guilty about her behaviour and thinks how her family will react at her behaviour. Feroza's inner guilt is an excellent example of a cultural conflict between Parsee beliefs and the modern outlook of America.

Sidhwa presents her opinion about the education of girl and boy in the novel. Though Parsee community has a liberal outlook as compared to other communities in the subcontinent yet they prefer good education for boys as they have a dominant role in society. A girl child is not allowed to acquire further study abroad as well as a girl child is not allowed to do the business. If any family sends a girl for further study abroad, the purpose behind it is to gain a good match for her marriage. Feroza has given permission of education in America by her parents but the purpose behind it is marriage only. Sidhwa effectively displays the views of elder people about foreign culture. Grandmother Khutlibai is anxious about Feroza's marriage who is living in America and acquired a liberal lifestyle and she says, "Our elders used to say, keep the girls buried at home" (Sidhwa, *An American Brat*. 121). This highlights Pakistani culture where priority is given to the early marriage of the girls.

Then Feroza falls in love with David Press, a Jewish man. She informs her family at Lahore about her love affair and her decision to marry David. The family of Feroza tries to persuade her from inter-caste marriage. The entire family gathers to plan how to stop this marriage. Even Zareen rushes to America to prevent her daughter from her decision. Sidhwa describes the consequences of marrying a non-Parsee and how it is harmful for their minority identity and peaceful survival. Zoroastrian has a prominent belief that if the girl marries outside her community then she is excluded from the Parsee community and banished from her faith. This points out that the Parsee community is a minority community and believes in its social code of conduct and marriage system. That is why the parents of Feroza does not like the inter-caste marriage of their daughter. The author handles the same issue in her first novel *The Crow Eaters* regarding Yazdi. He wants to marry an Anglo-Indian girl Rosy. He is being a sensitive and aggressive young man, he decides to revolt against his father on the refusal of the proposal.

Zareen tries to prevent Feroza by giving examples of Parsee girls who break the norms of community and explains their predicament. Yet she is not successful in her attempt to



persuade her daughter from marrying outside the community at the beginning. Zareen gets angry and says “I should never have let you go so far away. Look what it’s done to you – you’ve become an American brat!” (Sidhwa, *An American Brat*. 279). Zareen thinks that her daughter’s marriage with non-Parsee would be nothing less than cultural suicide. Her daughter will be expelled from the Zoroastrian religious community. Then she tries a trick and pretends as if she agrees to their marriage. She brings out the difference between the Zoroastrian and Jewish cultures in front of Feroza and David. She displays the contrast between the two cultures and uses this contrast to create a barrier between David and Feroza. She achieves success in her task as David changes his mind and leaves Feroza lonely. Zareen represents conservative approach where as Feroza represents liberal approach about marriage.

Feroza gets frustrated because of her breakup with David when all her wishes are crushed. At the end Feroza gets habitual of freedom which is available in America that is why she decides not to go back to shackles of orthodox culture in Pakistan. She wants to live and lead her life without any restrictions. Feroza expresses her views about her career that shows the effect of liberal thoughts. She says,

“I’m not settling anywhere without a career, I don’t want to be at mercy of my husband. If I have a career, I can earn a living, and he will respect me more”
(Sidhwa, *An American Brat*. 240).

Feroza’s opinion reflects the difference between the independent way of First World country like America and the dependent mode of Third World country like Pakistan. Sidhwa presents the impact of cultural differences on woman’s life. According to Pakistani culture an ideal woman is she who marries and settles down with family. While an American woman is independent who lives according to her standards. In the USA ladies are work-oriented and self-reliant. The condition of women is speedily changing in foreign countries as compared to subcontinent countries. Woman does not have any restriction in her life. Even the concept of lesbianism is promoted in America. Sidhwa introduces two girl characters Laura and Shirley and both have homosexual relations with each other. Though they are beautiful girls yet they can not tolerate the unemotional behavior of boys who change girlfriend in few months. That is why these girls prefer a girl as a sexual partner than going through a heartbroken situation. This points out the liberal, free and self-reliant life of America.

In this way, the present research paper focuses on the issue of cultural shock that is experienced by an individual from the Third World in a nation like America. At the beginning of the novel, Feroza is a timid young girl with her *Salwar-Kameez* outfit. But towards the end of the novel, she turns out to a representative of a self-assured and autonomous young lady. It means that the novel deals with the changes that Feroza undergoes



in the west as well as how her perspective about life changes. *An American Brat* brings incredible recognition and fame to Sidhwa. The novel moves around Feroza, “a convent educated, shy Parsee Pakistani girl, who goes to America and transforms into a confident and self-assertive girl” (Negi 147). The novel is a reflection of the typical dilemmas of the Parsees and their multiple alienations of multiculturalism in today's world. Sidhwa describes the conflict between two cultures on a social and personal level. Feroza was born in Parsee community lived in conservative Pakistani culture and became educated and self-reliant in American culture. This shows her multi-cultural journey and there she experiences cultural shock. This novel also presents Feroza’s journey from margin to centre.

WORK CITED

Negi, Vijay and Anju. "Displacement and Re-establishment of Identity in Bapsi Sidhwa's *An American Brat*." *Review Journal of Philosophy and Social Science* 35. (Sep 2010): 147-152. Print.

Sidhwa, Bapsi. *An American Brat*. Penguin Book, 1994. Print.

_____. "On the Writers' World". *The Nation, Midweek*. An interview by Naila Hussain. 26 May 1993. 8-19.

_____. *The Crow Eaters*. New Delhi: Penguin Book, 1990. Print.

Stephen, Stanley. *Bharti Mukherjee- A Study in Immigrant Sensibility*. New Delhi: Prestige Books, 2010. 1-160. Print.